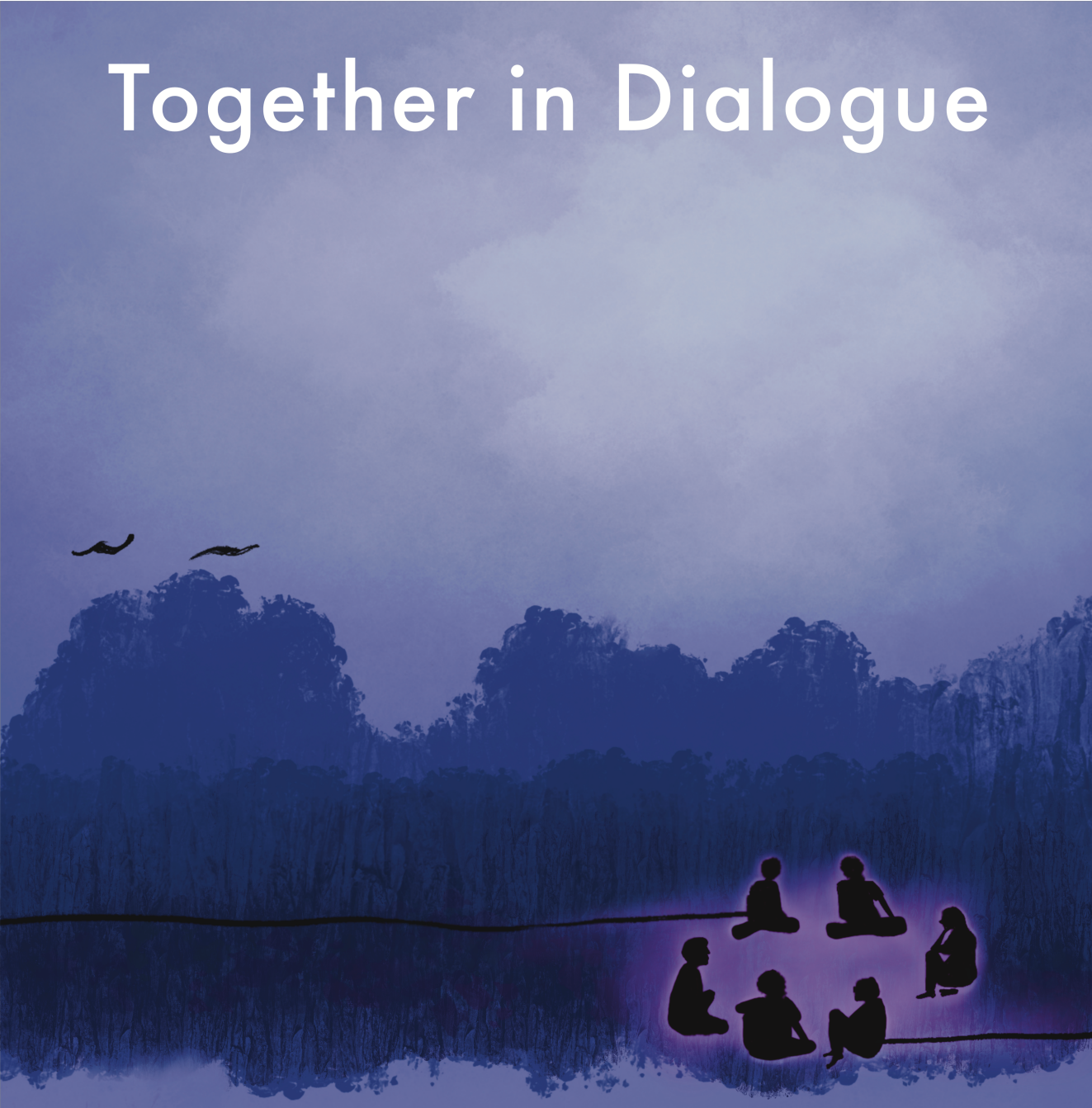
Together in Dialogue



The story of the education network
1993-2025

Together in Dialogue

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1993 - 2025

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The Story of the Education Network, 1993 - 2025

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The Network for me is like a sacred grove . . . All the plants growing in the wilderness; supporting each other in ways that are not easy to explain.

Borrowing from the Malayalam poet, Veerankutty who wrote that

“even if the plants are planted far away, under the ground
the roots will find their way to meet each other.”

Swetha

Some of the many who have made this book happen . . .

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Tanu writes, “Like a true Sutradhar Jane has connected the threads of diverse voices with abundant affection.”

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FOREWORD

This is an unusual book, by and about the 'Education Network'. Written with a light touch, individual voices emerge from deep experience, speak of serious concerns, and merge into the collective. We glimpse unconventional journeys, and the contours of a Network which has helped provide sustenance to intrepid travellers.

A set of `alternative' educators came together in 1993, and formed the 'Alternative Schools Network'. Working in relative isolation, they found it a relief to meet, share, learn from and support one another. They soon dropped the term 'alternative', realizing dangers inherent in categorizing people into 'us' and 'them', 'alternative' versus mainstream. 'Alternative' was a misnomer also because they were in fact concerned with real education, the best kind of education.

The Network began purposefully, its original focus being meaningful education in contexts of injustice and oppression. Members were pioneering education often in remote areas, setting up small schools or learning centres in rural Bengaluru, with Adivasi children in Tamil Nadu or Kerala, in Hyderabad, Pune, Phaltan (Maharashtra), and elsewhere. Several participants were rooted in or moved by philosophies associated with Krishnamurti, Gandhi, Paulo Freire, Tarabai Modak, Tagore, the Quakers, Montessori and more.

In a world so noisy, misdirected, inequitable and unsafe, surely it wasn't easy for these grassroots educators to create nurturing spaces, truly friendly to the child. They innovated, responding to diverse contexts and challenges, and carved out unique, enabling spaces for children to flourish. They experienced fears, doubts and dilemmas, and could share these in the Network, with like-minded persons doing similar work.

The Network's first Meet in 1993 was at a hostel in Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, Gudalur and the second at Pacha Saale, the Green School in Pastapur which worked with children of bonded

labourers. Subsequent annual Meets were held in Alampoondi, Bengaluru, Wayanad, Pune, Belgaum, Mysore, Hyderabad, Nashik, Dharmapuri, Silvepura, Phaltan, Sittilingi, Sevagram, Gudalur, Tiruvannamalai, Chennai, in school campuses or learning centres across South India which different members were committed to.

The report of the first Meet noted, the group came together for "refreshment of mind and spirit and for mutual encouragement – literally giving each other courage." Key principles were settled upon – the Network would have no formal structure or positions, raise no external funds, people would come as individuals, not organizational representatives, and decisions would be by consensus. These foundation stones brought clarity and sustained the collective over decades. Structure-less-ness may mean fragility, it can also mean strength.

The group grew organically. People joined, and were free to stay if they wanted to. No external compulsion, no material rewards, it was an inner felt need, a sense of belonging and solace in the fellow-feeling they found here. Guards were let down, difficulties shared. It was reassuring to discover others too were grappling with problems, and discussions helped lighten the load even when they did not lead to solutions.

Over time, the group diversified with grassroots workers, students, activists in organic agriculture, environment, gender, mental health, joining; all deeply interested in education, and believing that another way of living, another world, is possible. We get a bird's-eye view of the way they connected, in a group that remained more informal than formal, flexible rather than structured, unpredictable rather than planned.

Dialogue, deep listening, defined "the way of the Network." The levels of awareness rose, horizons expanded, as opinions were suspended while listening deeply to one another. The core of dialogue is building together, seeking not consensus, but a fuller, more nuanced and layered understanding. People listened with attention, care and affection, and as insights developed, everyone gained. One was free to probe, to speak, or be quiet, each person trying to discover what was most authentic for them.

The Network dwelt upon significant, wide-ranging concerns. Themes taken up at annual Meets, such as ‘Freedom and Discipline’, ‘Play as Learning’, ‘Sustainable Education’, ‘School and Community’, ‘Understanding History’, ‘Spirituality’, ‘Understanding Violence’, ‘Dissent’, and most recently, ‘Tribal Education’, encouraged open enquiry. Discussions were free-flowing, and exchanges often intense, without being aggressive or self-righteous.

Radical challenges got posed: How can school be a form of resistance? How is dissent to be expressed? How do we counter dominant modes of education, of life? How alternative are we to prevailing conceptions of power, authority, success? Discussants felt keenly the responsibility of being part of larger communities, in an endangered world, and there was soul-searching, about one’s role and goals.

The Network thus became a circle of trust, people trying to make sense together of a profoundly sick world. At the heart of its stability was the non-judgmental, non-confrontational ethos, very serious and caring. People could be vulnerable, friendships evolved. One-to-one conversations continued well beyond formal sessions, so did fun, laughter and songs.

There was plenty of human warmth and sensitivity in the meetings, and the Network. Evocative profiles reveal deep personal connect, and celebrate the lives of those who have passed on—very moving portrayals.

Not that the Network process was always smooth. The book acknowledges shortcomings, and mentions persons who left, perhaps uneasy about the way meetings were held, a lack of common ideology, or something else.

Reading and responding to Story of the Network has been, for me, a great pleasure. I find it fascinating that the Education Network has continued over decades, and still sparkles with energy. One feels enormous respect, wonder and truly, humility.

The writing is self-reflexive, contemplative, and carries the spirit of deep democracy. It amalgamates distinctive subjectivities, and

common concerns. Individual reflections by a number of persons were synthesized and constitute the substance of the chapters. Thus it is a collective document, yet conceived, written, illustrated, edited, by a smaller group, who took on the responsibility because they felt it was worthwhile.

It conveys a very interesting sense of how a loose, nonformal group might function, what a democratic structure might look like, how people may come together based on shared interests, and the human alchemy that draws them closer, keeps them bonded. Such learning is much required, if we are to build strong counter-culture. Too many idealistic groups dissolve under the weight of their own aspirations, and internal dissension.

The book, similar to the Network itself, is amorphous, rambling, not always ordered or disciplined. This is how the educators would have educated, I imagine, eschewing rigid discipline, allowing emotions, thoughts, to rise, fall, play out. They themselves wandered freely, experimenting, trying to discover, and do, what was right by the child.

Over thirty years, they faced multiple changes, and crises. Several unconventional schools or learning centres closed down in recent years, after the passage of the Right to Education Act. But rather than give up, they changed tack, moved toward working more closely with government schools. Through such constructive interventions, they are helping the system become more creative, and inclusive.

Another promising step are regional Networks. The dream is to have many small Networks across India. The Tamil Nadu Network, TAN-NET, took off in 2017, and has far more diversity than the national Network in terms of caste and class. There is a process of sensitization on caste, which can be explosive but also occasion for deep, empathetic learning. Conversing in the Tamil language brings local flavour, rootedness, and there is great potential for collaborative work, and together exploring cutting-edge issues.

The Story of the Education Network will interest all those exploring education and envisioning a new social order. There is much to learn from the creative interplay in Network processes, its fluidity, tentativeness, refusal to harden boundaries.

As wars rage across continents, governments adopt atavistic positions, communities retreat behind defensive fences, education today is too often reduced to an instrument for indoctrination. The need for fresh starts has never been more urgent. The Network, to my mind, affirms the possibility of change, born of intelligent revolt rather than mere reaction.

Dialogue, it suggests by example, can help create democratic, safe spaces. The dialogue approach holds seeds of transformation – of mindsets, situations, conflicts. When we remain alive to the present moment, listen, respond, speak, act, with thoughtful compassion, the self becomes more than itself. We see with others' eyes, as well as our own.

Meaningful change, we realize, in education, society, polity, grows from person to person, dialogue to dialogue, heart to heart. The Story of the Education Network carries power, inviting us to dream, imagine, act, weave ever-expanding webs of hope – fragile yet strong.

Deepti Priya Mehrotra
September 2024

Introduction: The Writing of the Story

I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles where vital and transforming events take place.

Rufus Jones (1863 -1948)

The fact that ten persons working in educational initiatives felt that it was worth joining that first meeting is sufficient acknowledgment that this is a movement of sorts and that there are both young and old who think that it is important enough to come together to challenge existing unjust structures by creating a more meaningful and harmonious world.

Ramdas

Over years any organisation develops a form, a form brings boundaries and boundaries creates shadows – it's a good time to look at our own shadows, and the boundaries of our form and what it excludes . . .

Ramgopal

The Education Network is an informal group of individuals, mostly coming from the Southern states of India, who are active in the field of education with "an alternative viewpoint". We have been meeting together for the last thirty years to share concerns and experiences about education and its meaning for our personal lives and the world around us. The group numbers around 50. When the Network began in 1993 most of us were involved in schools or similar educational programmes which were small in size and did not receive government funding. Presently a number of members are committed to working in recognized and registered schools that are larger in size and adhere to the examination structure as laid out by either the State Government or Central Government certification boards.

Nevertheless they endeavour within the system to be ‘alternative’ in significant ways.

We meet each year for two to three days. Although a theme is chosen for discussion, the meeting is less of an academic seminar and more of a free-flowing sharing of our concerns and views. Over the years it has grown to be a *biradari* – a community of fellowship that has sustained and nourished the work we do.

Meeting together at Shibumi, 2022

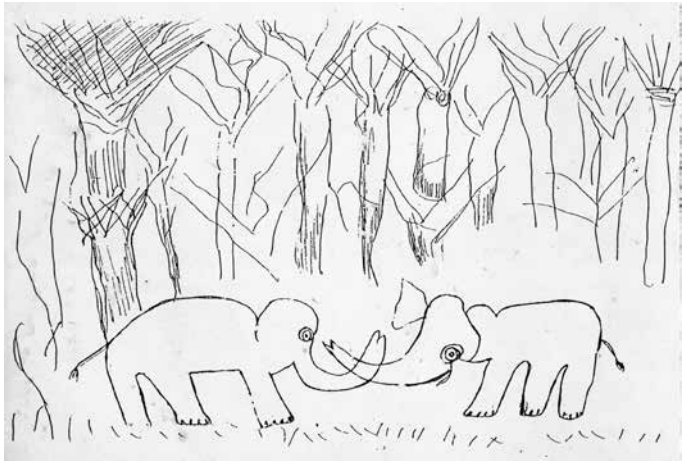
In these high-pressured times when people have deadlines to meet and are often multi-tasking on many fronts, the fact that a group of people have been gathering together, year after year without any external mandate or support, fixed agenda, formal structure or hierarchy is quite an incredible thing. For a number of years many of us at some time or the other have been mooting the idea of documenting the Network in some way, its journey and its place in the lives of the people who have journeyed with it for all these years.

In early 2022 a few of us – Yashodara, Gurveen, Jane, Ramgopal, Rama and Ramdas – came together to think about this and to start to put something together. We felt that it would be very insightful to learn what it is that draws, energizes people to come together, in spite of the various other things that demand our attention and time. We thought it would be good to listen to and document the various stories

and perspectives on the need for a network, the vision and energy with which it began, the winding paths it has taken, the flavours and characteristics that it has picked up along the way.

We wanted to capture the flowing contours, the varied conversations, the songs and poetry, the walks, friendships, what it has been, what it has not been and what we wish it could be . . . The idea was to create a questionnaire and ask for responses from anyone who had been associated with the Network over its more than thirty years' journey.

One significant source of the Network's journey has been the Reports of the meetings over the years. However, these have been uneven in length and detail. About eight Reports were printed in the form of small booklets but other feedback and responses to meetings were buried in letters, postcards, personal diaries, and scattered notebooks, so these accounts and reflections have not been easily accessible for all.



Harsha's drawing of the meeting of elephants, First Report

As we have been gathering material to put together this text about the Network it became clear that the purpose was more than reminiscing about and celebrating the past. One reason for documenting this journey is to look ahead and consider how the Network continues to evolve and to acknowledge what needs to be retained.

Some of the early members have now passed on and a number of new or younger members have joined so it has felt like a critical juncture to pause and reflect on where we are at present. More challenging is to think about how the Network might change. Krishna wrote how this coming together of the old and the new and the changing times need attention and care as we move forward:

> . . . it is not going to be easy, and we have to wait and see how it shapes up. We probably need to talk about this in detail deliberately in coming meetings so that we bring our collective focus onto this issue and not end up taking for granted that somehow it would automatically happen by itself.

At this point, as someone remarked, 'the rubber hit the road!' The initial dilemma was whether we should start documenting the individual work of many of the Network members or write the story of the Network itself. We also discussed the many ways in which we could go about this – making a short documentary, publishing a book with all the memorabilia over the years – songs, letters, art work, sketches, poetry or creating a website. After many sessions of thinking together, ('dialogue') and lots of 'silence, and meandering' we agreed that we should start with the story of the Network first. It was suggested that simultaneously the task of documenting individual journeys could be initiated.

From the beginning we wanted it to be an open and transparent process by inviting all of those associated with the Network – past and present – to be involved. We began by making a short questionnaire that we felt could be a guiding frame for people to think about and respond to. (See Appendix II.) This was shared with the Network email group. Some people sent in responses to the questionnaire; some responses were free flowing and others focused more on the questions.

Some people shared thoughts with one of us that we made notes of, and a couple of the members gave audio interviews. In addition, we received some letters, poetry (shared on bus rides!) pictures, sketches and drawings. These contributions have come from a diverse group of people – 'old timers', newcomers, some not so new newcomers, some regulars, some not so regulars, some occasional

attendees (who can give that important view from a distance!), and some practitioners and some academics on the ground.

These responses give us a sense of what a rich, intense and valuable journey this Network has been for different people in its surprising journey of thirty years. The Network has provided a very cherished and valued shared space for heartfelt connections, for dialogue, for exploring serious questions and a non-judgemental space offering an opportunity to be oneself, and giving affection to those who are a part of it.

The questionnaire was also framed to give an opportunity to voice constructive criticism and raise questions about tensions and frustrations that have been experienced in the Network. Ramgopal expressed how such feelings are rarely expressed in the meeting itself but need to be heard and addressed:

> Sometimes I feel when a precious space is formed over years and people have drawn value from it, there is an instinct to protect it – and so avoid unpleasantness. But there is also a need to be open to new ways of doing things, to listen to outside views just like in a family. After reading the responses, I felt that a writing exercise like this gave the space for people to be far more open, and so it has been a really useful exercise that should be done from time to time.

While there have been many fond reminiscences, there has also been a lot of thinking and sharing on what the Network could be. There are some voices of dissent and valid criticism that definitely need to be listened to and considered while thinking of the future.

There have been doubts cast on the very idea of writing a story of the Network and Arun commented:

> I feel we shouldn't be stuck with what the Network was in the past and allow for a dynamic vision to shape it. Times are always changing and we should be ready to flow with the needs of the changing times.

There is obviously a folly and danger to try and preserve or idealize

the past but it could be argued that there is also a need to see where we have come from in order to imagine more clearly where we are going.

This book, along with a proposed website detailing the Reports and fuller documents relating to members' work and writings, is intended not merely as a record of the past but as a call with a sense of urgency to pause, reflect, take stock of where we are and collectively think about how to keep this community relevant and meaningful as we move forward.

Shivaji, Ramdas and Rama on the move

There is also an intention to share our experience with a wider audience, perhaps even sow seeds for other regional Networks to grow, not necessarily in the field of education, so that "we have a broad base with which to challenge the powers-that-be" and so influence change from below.

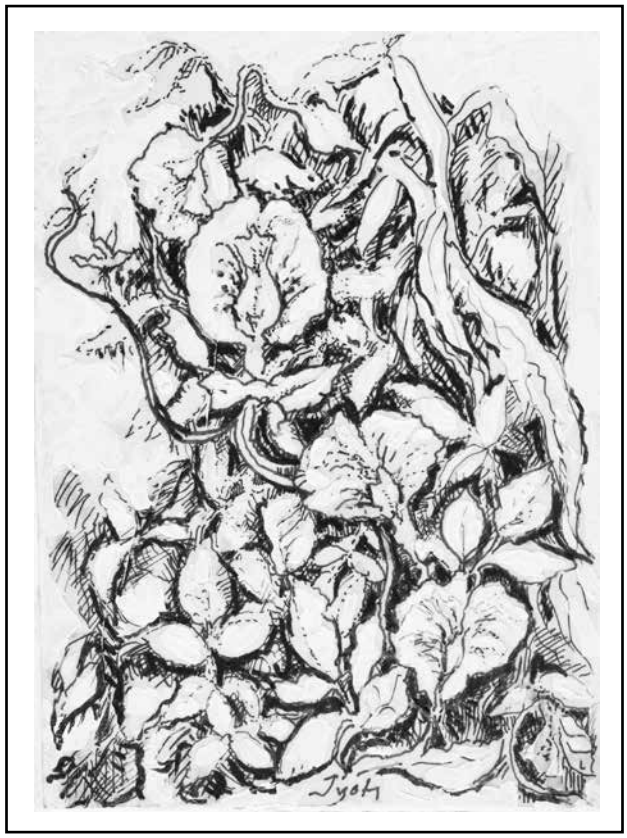
Another prompt to rethink the role of the Education Network has been to consider what is our responsibility in the face of political, social and economic change. In recent years there has been a growing alarm at the reckless privatization and commodification of education, on the one hand and the shrinking space for diversity on the other – with increasing control over curricula, textbooks, assessment and appointment of teachers, etc. Today the need for other forums to

discuss these issues becomes even more imperative than it was in those early days of the 1990s when the Network first began.

Almost from the inception of the Network there was a positive response from people who were not directly linked with the meetings but who valued the initiative and recognized that the discussions were relevant beyond the limited group of participants. Satish Sabarwal wrote to Ramdas in January, 1997, after reading the Network 3 Report:

> "Your group is too serious and too unusual to be passed over in silence."

The Network is not unique and shares many connections and undercurrents with other movements and communities, large and small. Yet, it is also particular in place, time and person. The Story of the Education Network is told here like a biography through many voices and images; it becomes a living bridge or moving sculpture that is made up of multiple textures, shades and dimensions.



Drawing of shanka pushpa by Jyoti Sahi

1

Beginnings

Our strength, I believe, has been that our commitment has not been to brick and mortar or to an abstract idea, but to each other and to the children we work with and through them to the communities they live in.

Ramdas [1]

The background

A wild creeper takes root because of many elements coming together – the landscape, the climate, surrounding flora and fauna, human history and other factors that we are just dimly aware of. Similarly, the birth of the Network did not happen accidentally, though there was perhaps an element of chance and magic of how people came together and where and when they did. In the Network there was a shared history or at least overlaps of history and geography but the causes and effects are not always traceable and many factors have been at work and play to give new shapes and forms to ideas and practice.

There were many threads that influenced different members of the Network, and these include both well-known and more obscure sources –Tagore's writings and work at Santiniketan, Nai Talim established by Gandhi and the many others who were involved in the movement, Rasulia, the Quaker centre and Kishore Bharati in Hoshangabad. In Maharashtra in 1926 Tarabai Modak and Anutai Wagh started the Nutan Bal Shikshan Sangh which worked both in the Warli tribal area of Kosbad and in Mumbai. In 1976 J.P. Naik, who was influenced by the radical work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educationist, founded the Indian Institute of Education in Pune. One of the notable NGOs that was started was the Centre for Learning Resources in Pune, which was founded in 1984 by John and Zakiya Kurrien and did seminal work in providing low cost and accessible

1 An article written by Ramdas for a Marathi magazine entitled 'The Alternative Schools Network and the Standardization of Education in India', 2012.

learning resources. CLR also contributed to innovative methods of teacher training.

From the beginning of the Network a number of members had been closely associated with environmental movements. Parisar, in Pune, had been engaged in the field of environmental awareness, education and action since the 1980s. It served as a catalyst for bringing people together to discuss not only environmental issues but growing concerns about health and education in the country and beyond. This was part of a global movement that drew on the work of people like David Suzuki, the Canadian ecologist who understood environmental education as a critical dimension of learning. He wrote:

We are the Earth, through the plants
and animals that nourish us.

We are the rains and the oceans
that flow through our veins.

We are the breath of the forests of the
land, and the plants of the sea . . .

Linked in a web of community, we are
all interconnected . . .

In Belgaum Shivaji Kagnikar has been involved in the Sarvodaya Movement from the 1970s. He has been working, since that time, both in the Community Learning Movement and environmental programmes such as forest regeneration, management of common grazing lands and de-silting of village tanks. He continues to be actively engaged in non-violent conflict resolution in the interest of justice for marginalized communities.

In addition, some members of the Network had links with a number of organizations like Action Aid which for a time saw education as a priority in the field of development.

Roots of alternative schools

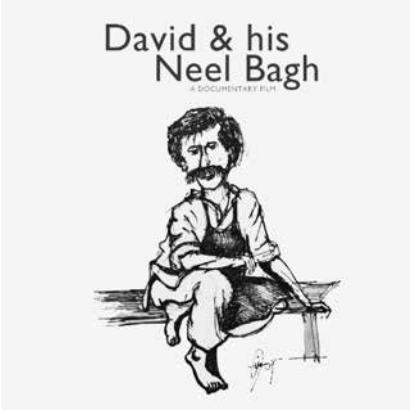
To understand the roots of these efforts we need to look back to the mid-nineteenth century at social reformers like Savitribai Phule and Jyotirao Phule in Maharashtra who did pioneering work in girls' education.[2] From the early 20th century and before Independence the National Schools were established as an alternative to colonial style education.[3] In Gujarat, Gijubhai Badheka (1885-1939) - the famous educationist and teacher - worked extensively to revitalize primary education.[4]

Post-Independence, in the 1970s and 1980s, a number of schools had started in South India. There was a changing climate and a growing sense of dissatisfaction and acknowledgment that schooling was not meeting the needs or aspirations of the vast majority of children. Both the Kothari Commission of 1964-66[5] and the Yash Pal Committee Report of 1993[6] very clearly expressed concerns about how the majority of children were being effectively excluded from public schooling and both groups urged practical and concrete efforts to reform the schooling system to make it more purposeful, accessible and equitable.

These so-called 'alternative schools' had very diverse roots. Some, directly or indirectly, were connected with J. Krishnamurti's philosophy.[7] In 1972 David Horsburgh set up Neel Bagh, a school at Madanapalle in Andhra Pradesh and, shortly after, he succeeded in integrating it with a small but in-depth teachers' training programme. Trainees from this programme went on to work in other schools and initiatives. For example, M.C. Malathi started Vikasana in 1977 in

2 See ***Savitribai : Journey of a Trailblazer*** by Leah Verghese, Ranjana and Medha Sundar, Bengaluru: Azim Premji University Publication, 2014.
3 See Krishna Kumar, 1991, ***"Political Agenda of Education: A study of colonialist and nationalist ideas"*** New Delhi: Sage Publications.
4 See ***Divasvapna*** by Gijubhai Badheka, 1990. National Book Trust, India.
5 The Kothari Commission was set up by the Government of India to recommend guidelines and policies for the development of education in India.
6 The Yash Pal Committee, Learning Without Burden was set up to review text books and curricula to make learning more meaningful and appropriate for children.
7 For more information on the early history of J. Krishnamurti's educational movement see ***Rishi Valley School: The First Forty Years***, by Roshen Dalal, Ed. Hans and Radhika Herzberger, 2005. Krishnamurti Foundation.

Bengaluru. Usha and T.M. Narasimhan worked closely with Neel Bagh and then went on to teach in the Rishi Valley Rural Education Centre where Narsimhan served as the co-ordinator. Later in 1982, they founded Sumavanam School at Cheegalabailu, Chittoor District.



David Horsburgh by Pankaj Khage.
With kind permission from Project Nomad.

David Horsburgh had not only been involved in the Krishnamurti movement but was also influenced by the Free School Movement in the West, current at that time, both in the US and in the UK. He had been inspired by people like John Holt, Ivan Illich, A.S. Neil and Herbert R. Kohl. David Horsburgh was also affected by reforms in UK mainstream schooling. On the whole this wave of reform had a secular, humanist and liberal outlook.

Other initiatives closely connected to the Krishnamurti stream of thought, are Centre for Learning (1990) and Shibumi Learning Centre (2008) both located near Bengaluru.

At the time of the Network's beginning there were other small, low budget initiatives like Sita School and Poorna Learning Centre in Bengaluru; Gurveen Kaur and her family started Centre for Learning in Hyderabad; Sathyalayam was started by Shankar and Sharada in Pondicherry, where later Rama and Ramdas worked. In the early 1990s Rama and Ramdas went on to start Vidyodaya School in Gudalur. Then there were others like P.V. Satheesh who worked in relatively well-funded and well-resourced, multifaceted NGOs like the Deccan Development Society.

Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan (KNB) was established in 1987 in Phaltan, Satara District. KNB is a Marathi medium, government recognized school and in some ways is within the mainstream but is highly innovative and non-conformist in its practice. The idea of nurturing each and every child across all social barriers remains one of the key principles of the school and is summed up in the words of Erik Erikson:

> *Someday, maybe, there will exist a well-informed, well considered and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit; for such mutilation undercuts the life principle of trust, without which every human act, may it feel ever so good and seem ever so right is prone to perversion by destructive forms of conscientiousness.*[8]

Maxine Berntsen, founder of KNB, and its umbrella organisation Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS) and Manjiri Nimbkar, who until recently was the Director of the PSS, and Madhura Rajvanshi have been closely associated with the Education Network since 2000.

Aksharnandan in Pune was started in 1992. Vidya Patwardhan who was closely associated along with Vasant Palshikar in Parisar, writes in a recent letter:

> 'Akshar' means a letter. The word 'akshar' also means something that does not diminish; aptly translated as enduring values. 'Nandan' means paradise. These two words fuse to convey the essence of the school – an abode of joyous learning and enduring values.
>
> Yes, we do believe that human-scale education needs schools that are small and rooted in their 'communities'. Aksharnandan attempts to make learning a dynamic and holistic process.

Gauri Deshmukh, who had been the Coordinator of Education at the school spoke about the children's connection to nature and the immediate environment:

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8 Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*, Faber & Faber. 1958:70

> Our children connect and learn through the environment, about the environment and for the environment.[9]

Most of the schools described above were working in relative isolation and there had been little effort to draw them together or to find ways of sharing ideas and resources.[10] It became evident as discussions continued that though each school was different in its roots, inspiration and context, there was also sufficient common ground to learn from each other's experiences, questions and hopes.

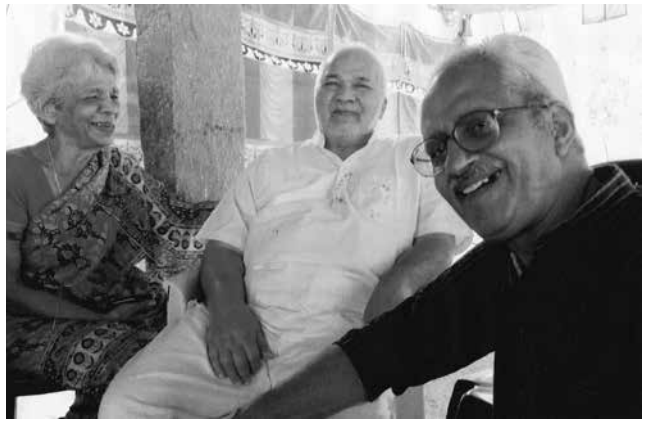
Yasmin and Baljit Kaur at Alampoondi, 1995

Ramdas writes:

> Each of the educational initiatives has been open to change and has not tried to cling to one ideological source. The starting point of each of them has been different: some have been inspired by philosophers and others by issues such as

9 See *Work and Wisdom of Vernacular Educators from India* Cha.1 based on interviews by Gautham Sarang and Nyla Coelho. 2005, Taleemnet Goa, India.
10 Since 1993 many 'alternative schools' have started and have links with the Education Network.

discrimination felt by marginalised communities like the Dalits and Adivasis, or issues such as degrading environments and majoritarian cultural forms. Each of these institutions has had to develop pedagogies that addressed these issues. Thus no two schools had a pedagogical approach which would have been identical. The Network provided the platform to discuss these approaches and effect changes. The idea was never to arrive at an overarching methodological approach in all the schools, a standardization. Rather the goal was to become even more sensitive to the needs of the communities or issues that were being primarily addressed and to make necessary changes. This openness found in the schools was also reflected in the Network.[11]



Valli, Vasant and Ramdas

Towards a meeting for networking

It was against this background that Rama and Ramdas wrote the following:

> The reason why Rama and I called for such a meeting was because in 1991 we had just started Vidyodaya School, and in a place like Gudalur we had no one to interact with, to discuss about approaches that were different. Earlier Rama and her

11 See 'The Alternative Schools Network and Standardization of Education in India' a talk given by B. Ramdas at JNU, 2012.

> colleagues in Pondicherry had attended a couple of meetings and met Gurveen and Malathi and others. But here in Gudalur, the chances of meeting people were very remote and we felt the need to reach out. We spoke of this to Vasant Palshikar when he was visiting us and he simply replied, “What is stopping you from meeting others?” and that set us on the journey to meet others who were doing similar work.

Ramdas recalls that it was after this ‘pilgrimage’ to meet kindred spirits who were doing similar work in education and encouraged by the response, that they decided to take things forward and to hold a meeting, not under the umbrella of any organization, but independently. He continues:

> The idea as articulated was basically to meet, share and exchange ideas. As we went around meeting people, we realised that each of the schools had something special to offer in different fields, depending upon the background of the founder of the school. Each of the schools was founded based on the inspiration of certain philosophies and had developed certain pedagogies based on these philosophies. It was a fascinating exposure. We felt that if this information could be pooled and shared it would benefit all.

There was also a deliberate decision to invite practitioners to the meeting rather than administrators or theoreticians. The letter sent in June 1993 to about 20 people read as follows:

> *Dear All,*
> *We have been in the field of education for well over a decade, but many questions keep cropping up as to whether we are doing the right thing by the child. We have felt a dire need to know what the experiences of others have been. As we talked to friends working in other schools and in particular with Vasant Palshikar and with Sathyabalan of Action Aid, Bangalore, the idea of getting together people seriously involved in education was mooted.*
> *We know that you have left the mainstream educational approach and struck out on your own. Each of us went into different milieux to try out our ideas . . . The danger is that of*

such isolated groups dissipating or compromising. It would be enriching for all of us if these experiences are pooled.

We therefore suggest a two-day meeting in the beginning of November.

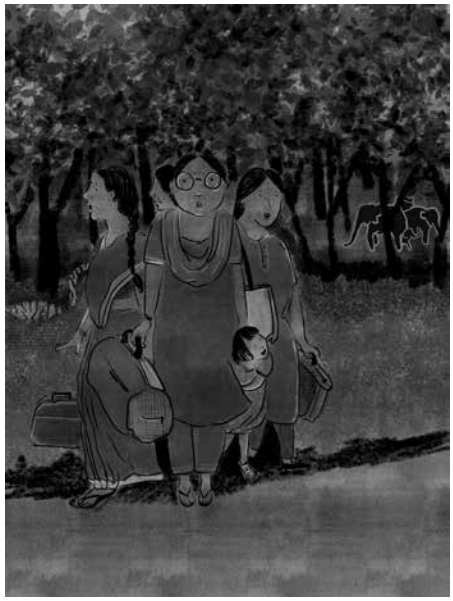
For those who received this unexpected letter it was a timely gift. Jane remembers the occasion:

> This was an irresistible invitation coming at a time when I was strongly feeling the need to come together with others and take stock of what had been a rather impulsive beginning and also a realization that an uncertain future lay ahead . . . There was a strong sense of wanting to relate to others involved in alternative education.

The first meeting

The first meeting was held at the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, in Gudalur, in the Nilgiris District of Tamil Nadu. About 25 people attended the two day meeting from the Southern States and one from Maharashtra. Gurveen, her young daughter Binit, and Gurveen's sister Rusveen set out together. Gurveen described their journey:

> We travelled to Bangalore from Hyderabad and met up with Malathi and Tara to travel together onward to Mudumalai. However, some connecting buses from Mysore to Mudumalai got cancelled and we had to take a later bus. When we finally made it to Gudalur, it was on the last bus entering the forest sanctuary. It was pitch dark and the bus put us down under a sign which said 'Danger Tiger Reserve – Caution Advised'. We immediately put Binit in the centre and, as the bus had left and as there was no way we could turn back, we started walking in the direction instructed and soon Ramdas came in his jeep and took us to the place where the Meeting was to be held at Mudumalai.



Gurveen, Binit , Rusveen and Malathi arriving at Theppakadu in the dark.

From the very first meeting, there was both sharing on a deeply personal level but also a serious engagement with ideas and practice in actual lived contexts.

The style of the meeting seemed to emerge organically, but possibly before we met, some persons had been involved in considering options of how to conduct the meeting . . . From the beginning there was a tacit understanding that this was a space for sharing and not presenting models of schooling. Also, from the inception of the group, there was an emphasis on the broader issues of education in relation to the wider society, and not a focus on strategies of teaching or methods, remedies or solutions.

One significant characteristic from the beginning was a readiness to share failings and problems and to search together for a deeper understanding. Ramdas in his talk at JNU[12] highlights this:

> . . . we noticed was that it was not just we who had problems,

12 Ramdas, 2012

> but all the others too had problems, some worse than ours – problems with the children, problems with the community, problems with the government, problems with funds, and so on. Therefore, we felt that this was also something that we could share and support each other in small ways if it was possible.
>
> It was in this context that the Network took shape as there was a strong impetus to come together and not work as disparate islands even though there were differences in the contexts people were working in and a wide range of underlying theoretical positions and styles of practice. At the end of the first meeting, we realised that we shared a common philosophy, although we have never attempted to articulate it. It had brought us together and compelled us to stay together. We realised that we needed to meet for our own reasons and so decided to meet again the following year.

The Network takes shape

Earlier, there had been no clear expectation of how the group could be structured or even whether it would continue beyond that first informal get together. In the initial letter there had been no mention of the word 'Network'; the idea was to network rather than to form a Network. The idea of a group as a network "seems to have emerged during the first meeting, particularly at the end, when we couldn't really finish talking and felt the need to meet again to talk over more things. As the first report of the Network says, "Towards the end of the meeting, all of us felt part of an emergent network."

Remembering that first meeting, Ramdas recently wrote:

> Going back to the first meeting, I still remember the last night that we were there in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in Gudalur, huddled around in the dormitory listening to each other in silence. Among the number of life stories we heard, one remains with me. In the silence of the forest, late into the night, soft-spoken Gurveen, slowly and measuredly, recounted how her father in particular and her mother too, helped to set

up the school and the heart-breaks that went with it all. That scene is etched in my mind and I can never forget it. I knew then that we would all meet again and talk again.

"When we had the sharing session at night, where people shared their personal stories I knew that I wanted to be a fellow traveller."

Gurveen

However, I, or, for that matter Vasant, never even for a moment, imagined that we would continue to do so for another thirty years!!!!

The first meeting was very open and loosely structured but, even at that very first meeting, some foundational ideals of practice were established. These included:

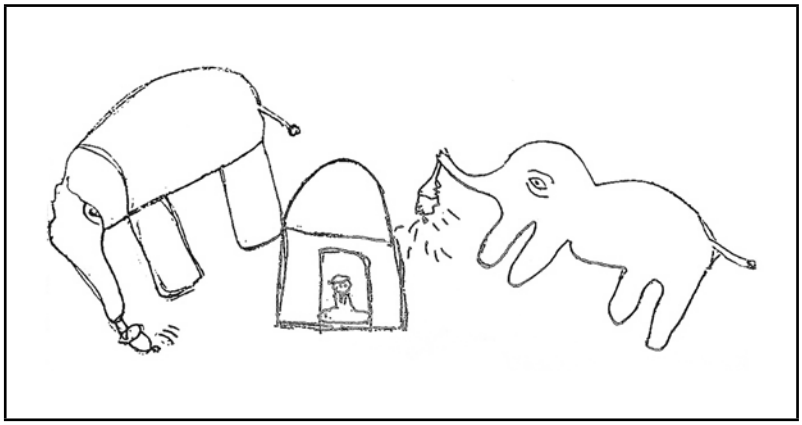
- There would be no formal or legal administrative structure or hierarchy to decide policies. Decisions would be taken by consensus and not by a vote of a majority.

- The group would raise any funds internally if needed but would not take funding from any external agency.

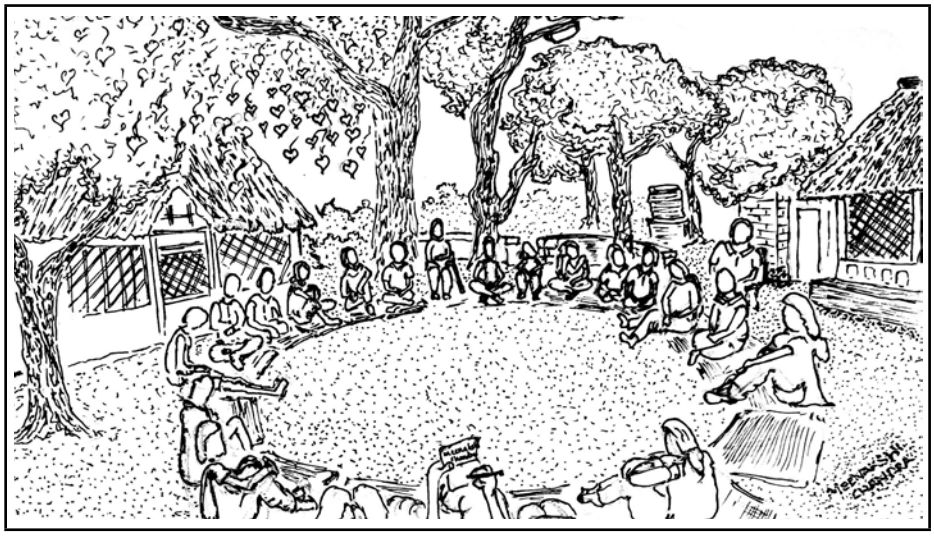
- People would attend meetings as individuals and not as representatives from institutions.

- The Network should be open to those concerned with education but not restricted to those working in schools or institutional settings.

These key decisions gave from the beginning a clarity to the Network that has helped sustain it and helped it grow through these changing years.



Harsha's picture. See Report 1



Drawing by Meenakshi Chandra, Thulir, 2011

2

Belonging to the Network . . .

We haven't tried to find a 'name' for ourselves.

I am sure there are differences of opinion, but there is a genuine attempt to understand each other and meet and support each other.

Swetha

Let us build carefully, with great sensitivity and attention to every action of ours. Sharing the learning from our work with others elsewhere has to be inherent in the nature of networking.

Valli

Diversity of membership

From the beginning the Network was made up of a network of friends and becoming part of the Network continues to be through personal contacts. There has never been a formal membership or registration process – beyond giving your address and contact details. People have come and come again and again, others have come and gone, and some people have come back again after a period of absence from meetings. Some came for just one meeting and did not continue to be involved while others may not always come to meetings but are actively in touch.

Ramdas describes how the Network grew in organic and unpredictable ways:

The Network has grown slowly over the years, although

> building up a large membership was clearly not a goal. In fact, one never knew if this group would go on from year to year. Each year one waited with bated breath to see if members attended or not. Some years there have been large gatherings and some small, but since 1993 we have met regularly almost every year.

As mentioned, from the very first meeting a decision was made that it was people, not representatives of institutions, that should be part of the Network. People have variously called it a family, a community even a tribe and in that way, friendship has been at the core of the Network. Gurveen sums up her thoughts about the Network:

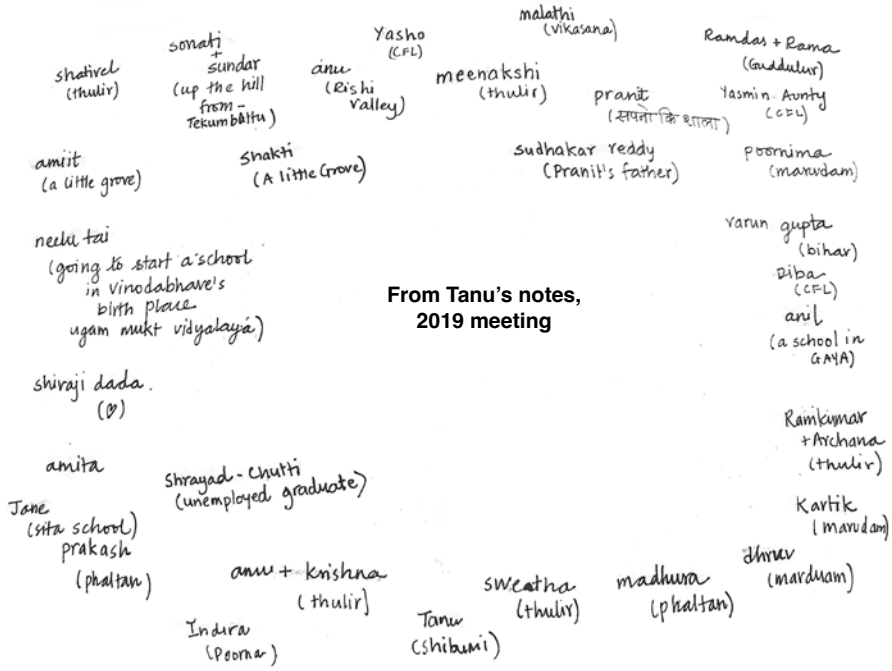
> If I think of the Network, what characterizes it for me is the people. Each person is special, and each person has made this group what it is with their presence and their contribution. There are friendships that started in one-on-one conversations in between meetings and blossomed into deep, lasting friendships.

It was also clear from the beginning that the people who came had very different work experiences. The membership was never made up only of teachers in schools. Over the years there have been activists, architects, academics, agriculturalists and people who taught or learnt in varied situations. Different members of the Network have been involved in a range of formal and non-formal educational centres. Members work in locations with different socio-economic groups whether in cities, tribal areas, small towns, villages or slum areas. There are shared concerns about education but also the related and wider issues of health, justice and environment.

An overview by Yashodara is given below:

> At any meeting, attendance may range from 18 to 40 even 45 people, a motley group of individuals interested in education from widely diverse backgrounds. I will try to name a few ‘kinds’ of people who come to Network meetings, but I may not manage to mention all kinds. The list would include those who run schools; learning centres with ground-up experience; grassroot workers faced with challenges and

possibilities from their respective *karma-bhoomis*; intellectuals of stature; students, researchers, academicians; well-read, well-meaning people who are confused, disillusioned; people wanting to make sense of contradictory multiple realities they see; sensitive people, idealists who want to connect with the real world. Basically, members are a variety of concerned, thoughtful individuals who refuse to be labelled and categorized, all of whom believe that another way of living, another world is possible.



In the Report of the First Network Meeting, we read:

> There is naturally a rich diversity amongst us. This diversity can work to our advantage if we do not let it divide us. It is one of our urgent duties to add to our knowledge and understanding of our heritage and tradition. Besides we should inform and enrich ourselves by learning from each other. The best maxim is to let each follow his *swadharma* while respecting the *swadharma* of others and let each of

> us go on perfecting one's own understanding and practice of *dharma*. Let us cooperate with and assist each other to better ourselves. We have the great example of the numerous *gharanas* of Indian classical music which have, in actual fact, brought varied musicians together and created harmonious melodies.

From the first meeting at Theppakadu at the Mudumulai Sanctuary, one of the special characteristics was the range of ages of people who attended. There is a common search at whatever age or stage participants are at. Swetha writes on this particular subject:

> There is a genuine curiosity to find a way when faced with challenges and one is not sitting comfortably on the decades of experience one already has, but instead trying to find meaningful ways to engage with one's work at any given point.

The children of the Network members have always been welcomed. Anu Chandy remarked on how the Network was like a close-knit family for her. She particularly appreciated the way many years ago her young daughter was immediately accepted and how for herself that had created a close bond with the group.

Anu, Radha and Subhash

Vidya and Amrita, at Alampoondi,1995

Secondly, there are a number of examples of different generations of the same family coming – grandparents, parents and children.

Archana and Chaitanya at CFL, 2023

Rama recalls, “Pranith came with his father! Both of them run schools, in different places. I must mention that it was really nice to hear about his father’s journey.”

Pranith and his father, Sudhakar Reddy at Thulir, 2019

Many have expressed their appreciation of the mixed age group and all have felt heartened by the fact that many young people have joined the Network and brought fresh energy and insights into the group. It was refreshing to have new members at most meetings.

One comment by Indira, writing in 2019, captures the richness of having a range of ages, “Of course it was a special kind of pleasure to see Swetha and Dhruva deeply engage with their work. The range of ages represented at the meeting from little Chaitanya, Leela and all the way up to us oldies also made the meeting a place of hope and optimism.”

Indira and Chaitanya at Thulir, 2019

Joining the Network

As mentioned, there has never been a system of formal registration to become a member of the Network. However, there has been a tacit understanding that as a group there is a commitment to attend meetings regularly whenever possible. Also, there is an expectation that each person who comes should stay for the whole meeting.

There has been agreement that there should be some kind of process for those who want to join the meetings. Ramdas writes:

> New members are first introduced by any one or two members who know them well and who feel they would benefit from and contribute to the Network. A brief bio-note is circulated to everyone prior to the meeting. Some of us communicate on email, others use snail mail. So far, I haven't come across any objections or doubts raised about the person being recommended, but this procedure of informing and checking with everyone beforehand that has evolved seems to work well. The new member attends, and if the interaction is mutually enriching, he or she stays with the group, or if there was little common ground that person doesn't come for the next meeting.

It was soon realized that some ground rules needed to be laid if the group was to have a sense of continuity and not be overwhelmed by too many newcomers or casual visitors. At the second meeting at Pastapur there were thirteen new participants and just a handful

of people from the first meeting. It was recognised that some discernment about participants would be needed. Quite early on there was some anxiety that if the Network became too large and loosely-knit then it would lose its warmth and spontaneity. There was a decision to keep the Network within the southern region (including Maharashtra). It was suggested that, if need be, new groups should form rather than expanding the original group. This in recent years has been a very positive move where regional groups have formed that converse in Tamil, Marathi or Hindi.

There have been times when the question of membership was revisited and some expressed concern that there was a danger of being elitist and isolated. Indira felt particularly concerned and expressed her criticism of the Network for being too exclusive. She remembered her discomfort:

> At one point when the discussion was about who should be part of the group, I felt distinctly uncomfortable: participant, bystander, interloper – which of these was I?

How could “a culture of belonging” -- a term coined by bell hooks, the American author, educator and social critic -- strengthen the Network.

Another expressed concern some years ago about the group not being diverse enough. Recently Maxine wrote:

> For a number of years, the membership of the Network expanded slowly. From time to time, interested persons expressed the desire to join the group. Usually, the recommendation of a member was sufficient to take a new person in. It became clear that there was a lack of diversity. In one meeting, Vasant asked those belonging to the higher castes in the group to identify themselves. Not surprisingly, these were in the majority. Moreover, the majority of the group were educated South Indians with a good command of English, as well as a thorough knowledge of an Indian language. Vasant’s question suggests that he wanted to see more diversity in terms of caste, education and language.

"The open, quiet, non-confrontational manner of talking and sharing together fostered ties of friendship that has lasted throughout the years."

Maxine

Sharing responsibility

As there had been a unanimous decision that the Network should not be registered or legally recognized, there has been no designation of office bearers. Tasks like sending invitations, making practical arrangements at the different venues and co-ordinating reports have been shared. There was no formal decision for any one person to take responsibility, for example, to keep communications open between the meetings. However, someone had to take responsibility. The burden fell largely to Rama and Ramdas who tirelessly over many years have been committed to follow up, visit and connect with people across the Network. One person observes, "Long before the days of internet, mobiles and WhatsApp, Rama and Ramdas would visit and contact people by letter and thus kept the group together."

Reports following the annual meet have been another way to keep in touch across time and place. However, as mentioned in the Introduction, the reports over the years have been rather erratic and for some meetings there was no documentation and for others almost verbatim recording.[1]

More recently there has been a Google group formed for people to share ideas, articles of common interest and news. There have also

1 In Chap. 9 the topic of writing reports is further considered.

been suggestions to have periodic online meetings to help keep in touch over the year between meetings.

Towards reaching a consensus

There has been some debate about how decisions are made. Indira strongly expressed her thoughts about the danger of an unacknowledged inner circle that makes decisions in a way that is not inclusive. She also feels that some are marginalized within the group while others are given more importance. She writes:

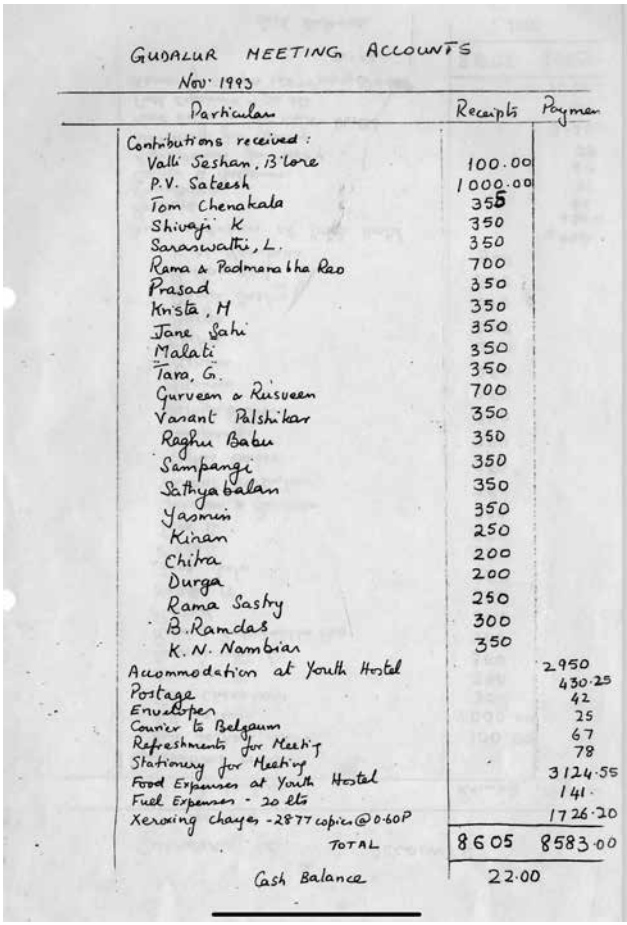
> Slowly, I sensed that an inner and outer circle existed. Members of the inner circle would be vociferously missed and efforts would be made to keep in touch. (Those were the days before the hyperconnectivity induced by technology invaded our mind space.) Personally, I never could figure out where I stood: inner / outer . . .

Prompted in part by this criticism, there was a discussion about transparency in making decisions within the Network at CFL in 2023. It was during this discussion that someone made a pertinent point in saying that each of us, as part of the Network, shares an equal responsibility to express concerns and offer constructive suggestions on how to strengthen the participatory workings. This has been an undercurrent almost from the beginning and in 1999 Vasant wrote how we as a community cannot rely on elders, or those assuming authority for whatever reason to give direction.

> In our small community even one person's withdrawal, resignation, apathy can weaken the community. The attitude has to be positively contributory, participatory. If something is going in the wrong direction, according to me, someone has to be outspoken about it and do one's bit to set the course right again.

From the outset there was a shared decision that we would be financially self-sufficient and not accept donations from organizations but rather generate funds when needed from within the group. This has been a critical decision and has been perhaps one of the

factors in keeping the group closely-knit and personally committed undeterred by others' agenda. It has also meant that there was a sense of keeping expenses to a minimum, and staying in relatively simple and modest places.



GUDALUR MEETING ACCOUNTS

Nov. 1993

Particulars	Receipts	Payment
Contributions received :		
Valli Seshan, Bangalore	100.00	
P.V. Sateesh	1000.00	
Tom Chenakala	355	
Shivaji K	350	
Saraswathi, L.	350	
Rama & Padmaradha Rao	700	
Prasad	350	
Krista, M	350	
Jane Sahi	350	
Malati	350	
Tara, G.	350	
Gurveen & Rusveen	700	
Vasant Palshikar	350	
Raghu Babu	350	
Sampangi	350	
Sathyabalan	350	
Yasmin	350	
Kiran	250	
Chitra	200	
Durga	200	
Rama Sastry	250	
B. Ramdas	300	
K. N. Nambiar	350	
Accommodation at Youth Hostel		2950
Postage		430.25
Envelopes		42
Courier to Belgaum		25
Refreshments for Meeting		67
Stationery for Meeting		78
Food Expenses at Youth Hostel		3124.55
Fuel Expenses - 20 lts		141
Xeroxing charges - 2877 copies @ 0.60P		1726.20
TOTAL	8605	8583.00
Cash Balance	22.00	

Accounts of Gudalur meeting, 1993

There were minimum administrative expenses but these were met by members of the Network. Ramdas remarks on Christa's support for the Network – "Her 1000/- rupee cheque came in year after year without fail. How much that helped in those early years!" He refers to Christa as "a fairy godmother"!

First impressions

Within the Network there is undeniably a culture and a way of doing things that has mystified, delighted, alienated, and surprised newcomers. Below are some impressions of people's first meetings, though it has to be acknowledged that these observations have come largely from those who did return. We might wonder what others who only came once might have said!

> I attended the very first meeting at Theppakadu. There weren't too many people but as there were more new faces than familiar people, I found the meeting a bit daunting. However, when we had the sharing session at night where people shared their personal stories, I knew that I wanted to be a fellow traveller.
>
> **Gurveen**

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

> If I remember right, my first meeting with the group was at Alampoondi I can still hear Valli's voice saying that name, thanks to Yasmin making the suggestion that I join. It was a wonderful and somewhat weird experience. The group would every now and then sink into deep silence during discussions or dialogues. I was fascinated by the process. I was also puzzled and at times very, very sleepy as the night wore on.
>
> **Indira**

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

> I first came in 1993 when Vasant asked me to be the scribe/ note-taker at the meeting, so I set to work, full steam. What has stayed with me from that meeting are: the riveting and meaningful songs that punctuated the discussions sung by all age groups from Malathi, Rama to Amrita, Neelu and even little Radha then probably just 5 or 6; the sharing session when I was gripped at the variety of ways working with children was possible given all challenges involved; the

friendly yet serious discussions, the openness with which people shared their experiences, difficulties and self-doubts; the feeling of being instantly accepted as part of the group.

Yashodara

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The first complete meeting I attended was the one at CFL in 2002. I was totally awestruck by the level and depth of discussion and the brilliance and experience of everyone in the room. I was a silent observer during that meeting but felt fully at home! I remember Rajan and Padma having a heated and lengthy back and forth discussion on one specific point in the theme. I was surprised to see how everyone patiently listened without interrupting. During the sharing session, the three freshers to the group , Subba from Timbaktu, Rajani Garud from Dharwad and I, were asked to share. I was completely amazed and impressed by how all these senior people with many years of inspiring, pioneering work and experience under their belts could be so humble and modest and listen! They must have all definitely experienced all what we were recounting but no one brushed us off with, “Been there, done that! “ Everyone listened, really LISTENED with so much care, attention, encouragement and affection!

Anu S.

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I came for the Network at Mysore in 2003, I think. I was invited by Malathiakka. I was one of the younger members and I felt very lost. I am an introvert and trying to communicate with others takes time for me. Silence is my best mode of communication. So when the meeting started, I was comfortable because of the silence. I felt I had come to be part of a family where verbal communication is not mandatory. I am a person of action. I can do many things and I like to do things with my hands. I felt that there was nothing for me to say in such a gathering of intellectuals. I heard other people say that

they felt supported because of the Network, that the Network meeting was like a tonic for them. But for me the Network meeting was a continuous reminder that I was a part of it, but I had nothing to contribute to the discussions.

Meenakshi

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

I first attended a Network meeting in 2010 at Sevagram. Gurveen had invited me to the meeting. I was just a few years out of the corporate world. And then I had spent time doing my MA in an academic world of social sciences (which was also new to me). I remember in my last corporate job – we had meetings where the time spent would be counted in 'man hours'– the amount of effort that went into a meeting (rather away from real work and the time was expected to be accounted for!) Coming from there . . . the first thing that struck me was the long periods of silences in the meeting . . . I would wonder what it was about . . .

That was perhaps one of the first times I experienced a large group as a contemplative space . . . in most other gatherings in the past, it was always with some agenda – celebration, or academic or specific plan. To come together for a period of 2-3 days just in a contemplative sense and be with each other was something that I had never seen, and perhaps except for this gathering I have not seen . . . (even the Vipassana retreat is a very agenda driven meet, towards enlightenment!)

I met Shivajidada in that meeting – to even see the man in his khadi . . . hear about his work . . . his simple affection and lightness was something . . . .

It took me time to be comfortable to move from a structured world to here . . . where things flowed, drifted . . . diffused, came back. Over the years I have absorbed and seen the beauty of it . . . and have also agonized over it.

Ramgopal

I joined Centre for Learning, Hyderabad in 2011. In 2012, I came for my first meeting in Gudalur, along with Gurveen and Ram. I had already met some of you before during my travels. I felt at home in many ways. I loved meeting and listening to so many of you whom I could relate to. I haven't missed any of the Network meetings ever since and look forward to each and every one of them every year.

Amit

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Our first impressions . . . One, I felt that we had met a council of elders, a wise group with years of experience and wealth of knowledge. Felt there was an immense learning opportunity. Secondly, the lack of moderation got to me. We started the introductions around 11 am and I was the last to finish my introduction just after midnight. I was told that non-moderation was the style of this group and that I will get used to it. Honestly, I haven't.

Arun

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[I received an invitation] . . . and I felt grateful . . . You know that feeling of being gifted something without even asking for it . . . A new environment from my very 'K' world , and yet a group of people holding the same questions. I talked to the Shibumi group , sharing the understanding that I will be away some days in the year to be part of such a gathering for the rest of my life! They agreed and so I confirmed my participation with Ramakka and Ramdasanna. First impressions of the Network were a happy blur . . . a diffusing of boundaries between sharings, questions, love, warmth, listening, music, silences and even day and night! I felt small and insignificant hearing stories of struggle and hope . . . and yet I felt abundant, supported and eager to find more meaning in my daily life.

Tanu

I attended the first meeting in 2015 (CFL, Hyderabad) I imagined it to be a formal event like the educational conferences that I have been to, but it felt more like a family event . . . The theme of the meeting was spirituality. Having never thought about that subject until then, I was growing suspicious if this was a cult of some kind. Soon, that was put to rest and I began to see that people shared very meaningful insights about what it means to be spiritual. I especially remember this moment when Jane shared an example of a person (a writer or an artist, I now forget) who indulged in habits that we don't associate with a spiritual person (like smoking, drinking etc.) and I could literally feel my body, heart and mind expand wanting to accommodate people that I have not made an attempt to understand.

Swetha

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

I joined the Network by sheer accident. I became a teacher by accident and similarly the Network was one such forum I organically stumbled upon. I joined the Network in a meeting that took place in Marudam. I joined it with a sense of reluctance as I was not ready for such a forum. I felt that my forays into education were still quite tentative and I was not clear as to how such a forum would benefit me. But my colleagues Arun and Poornima had attended the previous meeting and they kept sharing many interesting incidents and points that people had shared and they also mentioned that it was a very serious and caring space. So, I chose finally to take a dip into the meeting.

My first impression was mixed. I was clearly not ready for the intellectual engagement in the space and hence most of the points went above my head. But two things stayed with me. First of all, there was an air of informality (which I cherished and continue to cherish) in the space and secondly the personal sharing made a tremendous impression on

me. Vasant Anna shared in a moving manner as to what the Network meant for him and it was really touching the way he expressed and what he expressed. He was so vulnerable and tender. This sharing reflected the quality of the space which allowed for such tenderness and also the quality of Vasant Anna who was so majestic and yet totally without any pretence.

Harish

⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂

Meeting so many people doing good work for decades was a bit bewildering, overwhelming and inspiring.

Maya Seshagiri

⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂

When I sit back and reflect on our Network, I am humbled by two aspects . . . one, the fact that there is a space in the Network meetings for personal sharing. I remember the sharing in the first Network meeting that I attended in 2015 in Hyderabad. We had gathered post dinner for this session . . . open, unstructured, deeply personal. I have never been part of any space, group, network, organization that has this space, and I think this is the most special part that has brought members together to feel like a family.

Sujatha

⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂⁂

I joined at the time of the Pune meeting. I was cautioned by Maxine that this was a very special kind of Network in which sometimes people shared some very personal and private experiences and that one should be very careful while speaking in the meetings. I was rather subdued by this introduction and got the feeling that I or new members are not very welcome. As a result, I stayed away from the meetings and the communications. Later I visited some of the schools with the PSS team and got to know the people and their work. Then I started appreciating their need to communicate

through the Network. Later, I also realized how each one of them opened their facilities (schools, resources) and their hearts to the outsiders. I first attended a full meeting in The Theosophical Society in 2017.

Manjiri

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

During our first meeting at The Theosophical Society in Chennai, I remember trying to understand what this was all about. I was quite perplexed but at the same time excited by its nonformal format. Remembering Vasant Dada and reminiscing about him was prominent during this first meeting of ours. We heard the famous monograph of the Network “on dialogue” for the first time.

Ram and Archana

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

I am grateful that I was allowed the opportunity to join the meeting, . . Being the only student and not knowing many people, I found myself participating very tentatively, but on reflection I don’t think that approach hindered any experiences or interactions. Some sessions I had missed because of the Students Sea Turtle Conservation Network (SSTCN) work and recurring headaches, but the ones I was able to fully immerse myself in were most of the time quite thought-provoking. I came back with some questions alive in my mind (and scribbled on many pages in my notebook); some from others, some sparked by the conversations. In what ways am I compliant, silent? What modes of dissent are possible that aren’t necessarily ‘loud’ or ‘making noise’? Are they as effective? What is action compared to dis-action? If you’re not acting, are you part of the problem? Are we too comfortable with our ‘alternative’ label, and so we do not strive towards further change? Is there such as a thing a ‘normal’? Is the space for creativity a privilege?

Leela, a volunteer at Marudam, 2019

The first time I attended a Network meeting was in 2020, in Hyderabad. I think it was Gurveen who invited me to come be a part of the gathering. I had heard of and shared in the stories of the Network even before that, through Swetha, Krunal and Indira who had been part of the Network for a while by then. To be honest, I think I came to the 2020 Network simply because it was accessible as I was in the same city and I am so grateful for that. Because I loved being there. I was hesitant to come, for I am insecure and uncomfortable among a lot of new people; and to stay with these new people for multiple days too! But I felt extremely welcome and comfortable right from the start. So many people were stories that I had already known, only putting faces to those stories now. I especially felt warmed by the number of members who belonged to the varied age groups and how wonderfully everyone got along, simply by genuine friendship and love for one another, regardless of age, experience or work.

Ankita

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

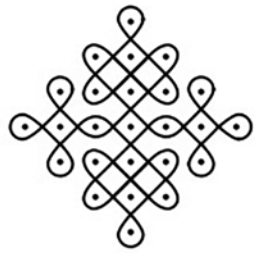
I was introduced to the Network by Nyla . . . I was beginning to feel extremely uncomfortable and disillusioned with formal education systems, the unravelling of our ecology, and a general sense of foreboding that accompanies dark thoughts.

I kept in touch with Nyla, and sensing my abiding interest in educational ideas and philosophy, she introduced me to the Network. I attended a meeting for the first time in 2016 when it was held in Belgaum. While I was immensely touched by the range of experiences and sheer knowledge people brought to the meeting, looking back, I think I was ill-prepared to appreciate the true value of such encounters. I also could not stay for the entirety of that meeting owing to some pressing personal commitments and missed out on reflections which would have enriched my understanding of the Network. Listening to various stories and experiences in the group as well as individual conversations, I felt oddly reassured that I am not the only one grappling with questions pertaining to life goals, the process of education, what does it mean

to belong, where do we fit in the grand scheme of things and so on. As an academic and researcher, I often present at conferences etc., wherein arguments and data form the centrepiece of all presentations. Everyone seems to have some point, but it is challenging to determine if anyone else is listening. The Network gatherings, on the other hand, seem to be built around the idea of listening. It can almost be frightening to realise that people are actually locking gaze with you, reaching out to grasp your words with rapt attention. I also found it to be a space that is incredibly adept at holding silence as a form of reflection. One gets so used to the constant chitter-chatter of noises and voices that just sitting in a room full of people without anyone saying a word can feel surreal. It is a group that fully recognises the limitations of language and is open to all forms of communication, verbal and non-verbal. The spontaneous flow of music felt like a beautiful way to ease people into a circle of trust and sharing.

For any person joining for the first time, I would recommend spending as much time as possible, perhaps a day before and after the meeting to get a sense of the spirit of such a space. I could not do it, and regret all the missed chances. The beauty of education is that it is pretty much a life project if one were to start thinking of it. A cultural tool or weapon, depending on how it is used, education forms the foundation for many other questions pertaining to collective behaviour, values, skills, aspiration and so forth. Being able to connect and learn from people who have spent a greater part of their lives engaging with these questions is a privilege and inspires one to take a deeper plunge into initiatives they believe in.

Deborah



Gateway at Adyar, Chennai

3

Time and Place of the Meetings

The setting for the meeting makes a big difference
to the mood.

That we should continue to have the meetings in each of our schools, no matter what the difficulties, became a certainty.
(Written in 1996 after the meeting at Vikasana)

From 1993 there has been a meeting almost every year except during the pandemic when we had to meet virtually. Meetings have been between three to five days.[1]

The first meeting had been at a hostel in Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary but the second meeting was at Pacha Saale, the Green School in Pastapur, in 1994. Having the meeting in an educational setting had the advantage of learning about a very different kind of school that had emerged out of a concern to meet the needs of children of bonded labourers and was dedicated to bringing together formal learning and life skills. The school was oriented towards training in vocational skills that would enable students to find work as they grew up.

Secondly, the school was part of an integrated programme that included an engagement with different patterns of agriculture and community activities. This proved a good opportunity to be exposed to pioneering work in other places.

The third meeting was held at the Gandhi Rehabilitation Centre in Alampoondi, near Tiruvannamalai. Seeing the beautiful and simple

1 See Appendix I for details of time, place, theme and reports of meetings held between 1993 - 2024.

setting and the extraordinary work and dedicated lives of those working there was an inspiration, and made us realize that the place of our meeting richly contributed to the way we met.

Most meetings since that time have been held in school settings and have included Anand Niketan in Sevagram, Kanavu in Wayanad, PSS in Phaltan; Puvidham, Marudam and Thulir in Tamil Nadu; Purna Pragna in Mysore, and Vikasana, CFL, Sita School and Shibumi in and around Bengaluru.

L.S. Saraswathi writes:

> The idea of holding the Network meetings in the alternate schools/learning centres was a privilege wherein every member can feel the social context, enthusiasm of children and the teachers in involving themselves in many activities that are relevant to their lives. Memories of being there remain in the mind for a long time.

Watching children perform at CFL, Hyderabad, 2004

Amit singing with children, Thulir, 2019

Gurveen also appreciated the opportunity to stay in the different schools.

> Each place is special and has its own flavour. At each centre and at every meeting one is struck by the incredible hospitality, good food and unexpected snacks all served throughout, even late into the night, with such love and care

by each hosting group . . . while trying to keep things simple and the expenditure to a minimum.

Here are some experiences of different places visited over the years:

I remember Malathi's Vikasana as a place of tremendous hope . . . Everyone was helping in everything, cooking, cleaning and so on. It was like a Garden of Eden.

A night's stop over at Vikasana — I think on our way back from Gudalur – and Malathi showing us around the place, the dome they had built, the artwork, the carpentry work by the children and then telling us which child planted which tree— though there was almost a mini-forest in that place! It was so poignant – the beauty of Vikasana, the years of hard work and nurturing of so many students and, the regret that it would not continue to be.

xxxxxxxxxxxx

This year we met in the truly magical setting of Kanavu, the school run by K.J. Baby and Shirly for tribal children in Wayanad District of North Kerala . . . We were grateful to meet in the setting of a school in session, since it helped to constantly link our concerns to the real context. We witnessed teaching sessions of *Kalaripayattu,* one of the ancient martial art forms of Kerala, conducted in the Gurukula tradition and setting, which was an immensely rewarding experience . . .

Extract from the Report of the Network Meeting at Kanavu, 1999

Library at Kanavu, 1999
Photo: Amal Dev

Vidya and her team's efforts at Aksharnandan, especially actually seeing a school able to run a Marathi medium school in the mad scramble to prioritize English, was such an eye opener and the interactions with the children where they asked so many questions unhesitatingly.

Meeting at Centre for Development Studies and Activities, Pune, 2000

Centre for Learning, Bangalore, was another beautiful campus with its dream library, and thoughtfully run school. So much to learn from Yasmin's clarity and way of addressing parents' questions and concerns about alternative schools.

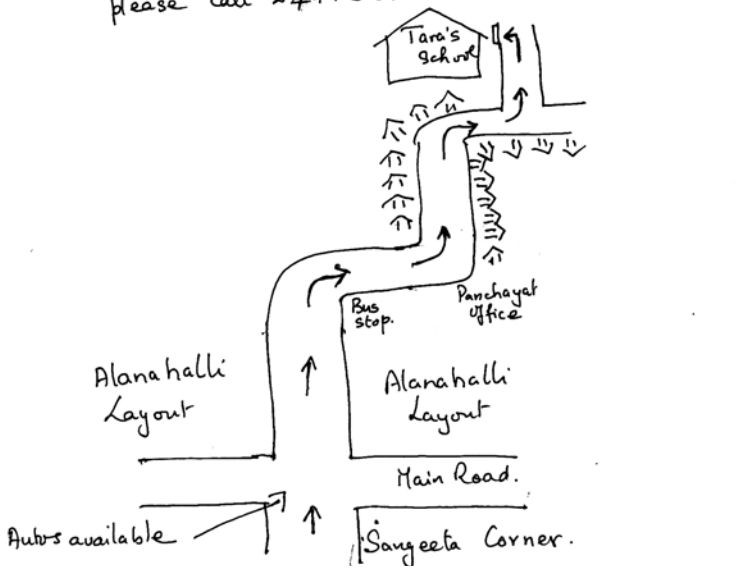
Hans, Chaitanya and Sharada at CFL, 2023

Meetings at CFL, 2002, 2013, 2023

Tara's map to get to the meeting at Purna Pragna, 2003

Instructions to get to the venue:

1. Please ask for Tara Akka's School not Purna Pragna.
2. At the Bus-Stand / Rlway Station ask to be taken to Siddhartha Layout - Sangeeta Corner (This is a shop.)
3. From Bus station - by auto — Rs 40
   Railway Station — " — Rs 60
4. Ask for Alanahalli (village) not Layout-
5. The School is ½ km. from Alanahalli Panchayat Office.
6. Tara will inform all autos at Sangeeta Corner to pick us up. So get down there. The charge from Sangeeta Corner to the School is Rs 15/-
7. If you have any problem, wherever you are, please call 2471569.



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At Nashik, it was our/the teachers' turn to be educated about toilets also. All along any place without a sewage system was considered unhygienic and backward. Now I learnt that the sewage system was unhygienic as it was polluting all our rivers.

Meeting in Nashik, 2005

The meeting was a small but focused one as there was an effort to try and come to some consensus about what could be defined as ‘an alternative school.’ It was decided that while there were definitely common elements and practices it was preferable to keep it fluid as each school or learning centre had grown out of different contexts and understandings of what was meant by sustainable or alternative.

Puvidham’s emphasis has been on rural development and agriculture and a curriculum that integrates aspects of sustainable living in eco-architecture, organic farming and holistic health. The word *‘puvidham’* means ‘love for earth’ in Tamil.

This mud and thatch building was made in 2001 as the number of children increased.

Meeting at Puvidham, Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, 2006

The sheer beauty of Jane's place and Sita School – with the simplicity and attentiveness.

Meeting at Sita School, 2007

Meeting at PSS, Phaltan in 2008

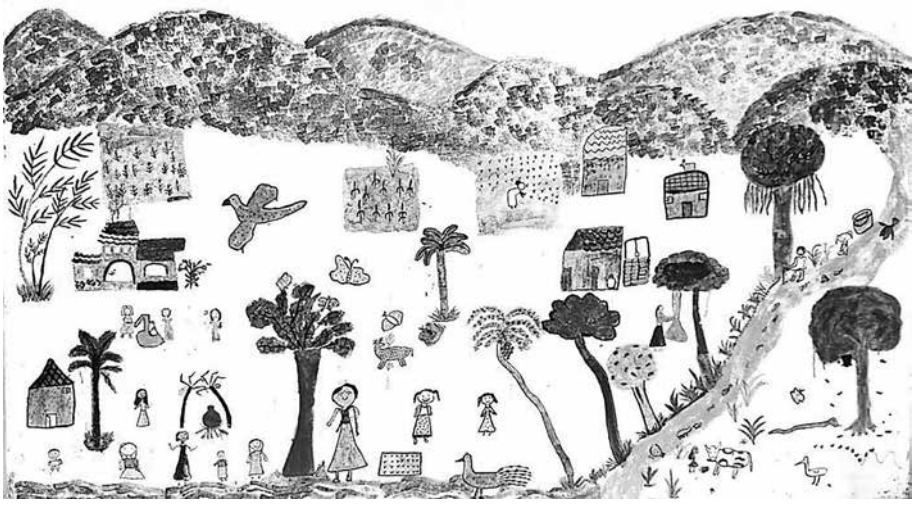
Being in the Gandhi Kutir, at Sevagram, Wardha was a very special feeling. Seeing Sushama reflectively running Anand Niketan on the principles of Nai Talim, seeing the children spinning on the charkha and working on their vegetable patches as a part of their day was very inspiring.

Meeting at Sevagram, 2010

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Thulir was another beautifully designed and sensitively run place – in every detail. People can take lessons in how to design, plan and execute a programme with sensitivity to the environment, the work, and the people. The way we were looked after by Anu, Krishna and their team was evidence of this culture being passed down. And on our walk at night, we saw a whole bamboo clump lit up with a thousand/millions of fireflies.

The place has its own magic – the fireflies, the stars, the silences. The loos, attention to detail. Everything.



Children's drawing of Thulir and its surroundings

In the End Note in Network Report 19 there is the following comment:

> In retrospect, it seems so appropriate that we discussed 'Play' in Thulir. It is a place where work and play are so intricately interwoven into the daily life. Krishna and Anu's serious engagement that is also lived with fun is the balance that we need in our work, teaching and life.

Meetings at Thulir, Sittilingi, Dharmapuri Dt. in 2011, 2019

> Vidyodaya, Gudalur, yet another inspiring and lively place – from the design of the school to the care and thought put into the school and the nurturing of their team/next generation. The sensitivity and respect with which the team nurtures the local/ tribal culture and lifestyle. Teachers are recruited from local communities and are encouraged, along with the children, to strengthen local dialects.

Meeting at Gudalur in 2012

Meeting at Chennai, 2018

For two years the meeting was at the Adyar Theosophical Society in Chennai and this offered the special, unforgettable opportunity to join in the night turtle walk under Arun's guidance. One year many went to the beach concert which was organized, in part by T.M. Krishna, with a unique combination of professional musicians and voluntary players, singers and dancers away from the usual elitist concert milieu.

Chennai Meeting, 2017, 2018

Meeting at Shibumi, 2022

Stream at Sittilingi

4

The Way of the Network

I am groping for an image that might capture the Network Meeting . . . The appropriate representation of the Network Meeting is that of a river, both visible and invisible. The visible river is the theme that is chosen for discussion, the visits, and the activities planned. The subterranean stream is the fellowship, the sharing that undergirds this group and every meeting.[1]

Gurveen

Coming to meetings is a way of touching base and gives a feeling of pilgrimage.

Hosting a meeting - All the coordination about food, logistics, accommodations and other arrangements . . . It was like conducting a marriage.

Ramkumar

For me it is all about process . . . collaboration . . . listening and respecting each one.

Valli Seshan

From early on there was a recognition that the initial impetus was not to form a Network or set up a formal organization – but to network, share and learn from each other.

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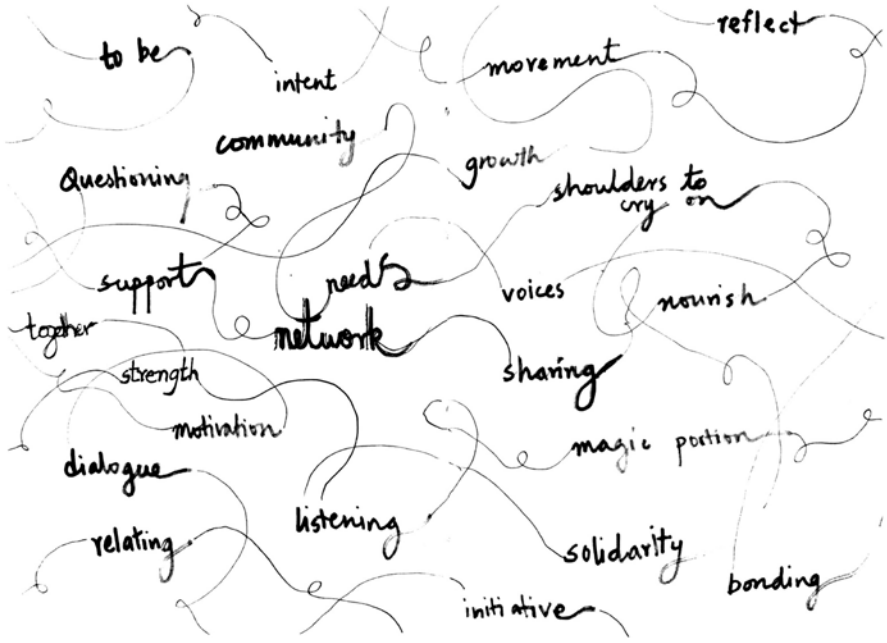
1 The End Note of the Report following the meeting at Thulir in 2011, Network Meeting 19.

Threads of the Network by Tanu



Thirty years after the first meeting of the Network in 1993, Ramdas shared his thoughts about what he thought made that gathering different from other meetings he had attended.

> My first impression of the people who came to the Network was that this was a group of individuals who were highly devoted to their work and not interested in projecting themselves. This was in contrast to the general meetings of NGOs that I had attended where everyone always tried to prove their point of view, not to mention talking about their so-called achievements. At our meeting there was a certain humility with which they had approached their work given the fact that they had much to learn.
>
> There was a deep empathy in the group as the meeting progressed and people wanted to share their journeys without any hesitation. As individuals who had decided to move out into difficult areas to work, it became essential that we find

> a space where we could talk without being judged. None of us had a background of a Tagore or a Gandhi, nor were we beholden to any particular philosophy which we could claim was being practiced and therefore justify our positions. On the other hand, it was simply a deep commitment and empathy with children and doing what was right by the child, that characterised the work of each of these people.

There was a difference in the way of meeting from other kinds of meeting where people came together to share their professional or academic work. Anu S. summed it up in the following words:

> In most other coalition or network meetings participants come to showcase their work or ideas. There is an obvious air of competition, of trying to prove oneself, trying to prove how one' s work is far superior than the rest. There is a need to be vocal, a need to be loud and demonstrative. The focus is on the differences between participants. This becomes a huge barrier between participants and one comes away without getting close to any other participant. But here in our Network the focus is on the common questions and dilemmas we all face, on the similarities and the values shared by everyone, on looking together at an issue. There is no pressure on anyone to talk. Instead, listening attentively is considered important. This is a great relief and clears the way for better understanding, empathy and long-lasting relationships. This is what has held the Network together for so long! The paper on dialogue, which we often re-read and remind ourselves of, has also helped.

Another distinctive feature of the Network was that it was not focused entirely on work but blended together the personal and the professional. Valli, in 1999 shared her experience of how some groups meet that only focus on work:

> We have seen that groups which come together only to share work and find solutions to specific problems do not go far. They often disintegrate. We need to recognize this and see all our deliberations, meetings, discussions, report writing etc., in this light.

More recently Ruby summed up how she responded to the way of the meeting.

> This is the first song that I learned from the Madiyaa children. The children because of whom I got connected to the Network.[2]

रे लो या रे ला रे ला रे ला

Re lo yaa re laa re laa re laa (this is just like 'la la la')

उडला मेटा बेरा मेटा मंदन माउयो

Udlaa metaa beraa metaa mandan maauyo (small mountain, big mountain, there's nilgai)

केयोन इंता मलू गंदल ओडसो रे

Keyon intaa malu gandal odso re (peacock is calling, eagle is watching)

> It's a song that just describes what's happening. No assumptions, opinions, judgements or agenda. It is what it is. Sure, you can find deeper meanings and read between the lines . . . But at the core of it, it's just the natural falling-in-place of events. Or rather, events that fall in place naturally. If you ask me how a Network meeting goes, I would respond with this song.
>
> **Ruby**

What holds the Network together?

In the introduction of the report of the 4th Network Meeting at Vikasana there is a comment on the fact but also the potential of our diversity: "There has been an underlying sense that the way we relate to each other, and our ability to accept, listen and respond to each other, is the testing ground of the very self-awareness and mutual 'battle for truth' that we are concerned to foster in our schools."

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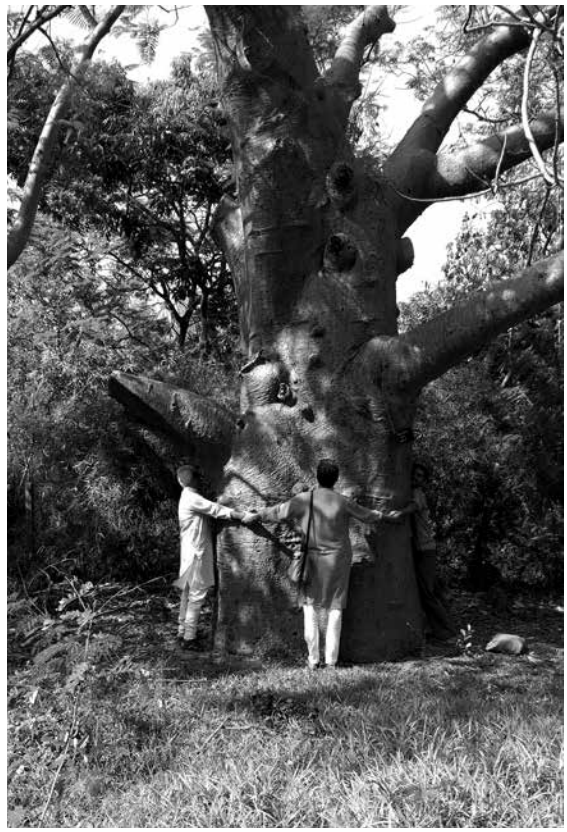
2 The Madiyaa community live in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra.



Adyar, 2018

There has never been a single ideology that has linked us together, which some may feel is a weakness, but in practice it has proved a strength in sustaining the group; no one has insisted on a single vision but rather there is a sharing of ideas. Occasionally discussions have arisen because we have not come up with definitive statements about the Network's position on some issue. This does not necessarily mean compromise or lack of clarity. Gandhi himself never claimed a knowledge of absolute truth and said, "Relative truth is all we know. We can only ever follow truth as we see it . . . Such pursuit of truth cannot lead anyone astray."

There were many responses from the group to the question "What holds the Network together?" A sampling of those is given below:

What holds the Network is the relationships that have been slowly built continuously over the years.

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I think for me one of the things that hold the Network together is honesty. There is no room for sentimentality or making exaggerated claims. There is also a constant effort to ground what we say in experience without being merely anecdotal.

There are many conferences, seminars and discussions about education but in the Network, it is the knowledge of your personal life being inseparable from your work that makes it distinctive.

Jane

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I think here is a place where we can shed most masks, not be afraid of the many virulent influences . . . not have to share only ideas or only emotions or only work or only personal stuff. Here is a place where people are comfortable being themselves with their many facets intermingling . . . as they are.

Ramgopal

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When I first went for the meeting, I was going through a difficult time in my personal as well as working life. I so much wanted to share and reflect so that I could get better clarity to manage myself. I could do that as everyone listened so compassionately during the personal sharings. One often needs such a space to get comfort and clarity. Many of us genuinely want to be a part of the community that's reflective and yet accepting. I have a feeling that the Network has provided such space to most participants, including me.

Sushama
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

> There is an exceptional amount of caring within the Network – caring for one another, for the education system, for the children, for the planet, for oneself. And this caring doesn't seem to be conditional on the usual variables. It is caring simply because we are human, we'd like there to be opportunities for a meaningful existence and that we have the capacity to care. And this caring isn't frivolous either, it is rooted in deep critical thought and in truthful realisation that caring takes resilient strength, especially in the face of everything that holds true of our world today. This critical thought is rigorous and comes through in the questions we ask, in the answers we attempt to discover and, in the silences we allow for ourselves.
>
> **Ankita**

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Friendship has sustained the group over many years – over these years there have inevitably been many crises and 'good times' both in people's lives and in the workplace: schools have closed, new schools have opened, people have been sick or coped with loss, members have passed on but also some have been recognized for their work like Shivajidada[3] or more recently Deepa Palshikar.[4]

> At one level the Network is a tonic and a consolation but I think also what has sustained the group is a lack of complacency. Radical challenges have been posed by different members at different times. This has been true from the early days such as when Satish Sabarwal after reading the Report really challenged the group not to become too insular and to reach out and learn from others.
>
> **Jane**

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3 Shivajidada is a Gandhian activist in Belgaum District. He was recently awarded the D. Lit. from Karnataka State Rural Development and Panchayat Raj University, Gadag, Karnataka. He has been given several state awards both from Karnataka and Maharashtra for his work as a social worker.

4 Deepa Palshikar has worked in Anand Niketan in Nashik since 2002. She recently received Prayogshila Shikshak Puraskar Award from the Marathi Bhasha Abhyas.
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Compassion and love for each participant is the feeling that characterizes the Network. The common work that all the members are doing is the main binder. Apart from that perhaps the members draw strength from each other. For me this was missing. Maybe because I don't look for strength outside. But it was a space that provided care and guidance.

Meenakshi

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One person modestly sums up his thoughts about what holds the group together despite its lack of structure and organization:

We have not gone out of our way to support each other and many of us are not in a position to do so. But just knowing that there are people out there to whom one could lean on, reach out to, has been a great help.

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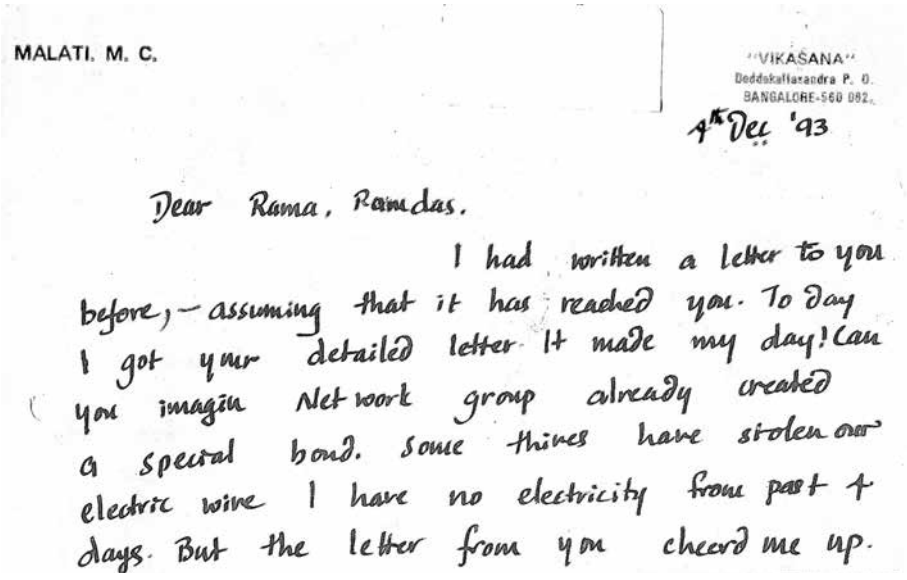

MALATI. M. C.

"VIKASANA"
Doddakallasandra P. O.
BANGALORE-560 062.

4th Dec '93

Dear Rama, Ramdas.

I had written a letter to you before, — assuming that it has reached you. To day I got your detailed letter. It made my day! Can you imagin Net work group already created a special bond. Some thives have stolen our electric wire I have no electricity from past 4 days. But the letter from you cheerd me up.

Discussion at Sita School, 2007

The way of meeting

Ramdas writes,

> Today, just by chance, I found the report of the first meeting Network in Mudumalai in 1993. It is a moving document. One sentence in the introduction struck me:
>
> "As we meet, the purpose of the meeting is met."
>
> The Report makes it clear that the group comes together primarily for refreshment of mind and spirit and for mutual encouragement – literally giving each other courage.

(Extract from the invitation of Ramdas to the Network Meeting of 2007)

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In response to the recent questionnaire Ramdas reiterates his sense of the Network as a place of growth and exchange:

> For me the non-judgemental character of this space is a
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very important thing that we have created. It seems to have stemmed from the fact that we are all practitioners and we are trying out things and are always open to seeing our mistakes. Course correction is an essential part of our work and we are willing and open to it. Here was a space where we could open up our thoughts, share our deepest fears, our sometimes ludicrous concerns and yet be accepted as a friend. We listened, really listened to each other with empathy.

There are many things said, not said in little spaces outside the meetings that are precious—friendships built.

Ramgopal

Although the structure of the meetings has been loose and flexible, some essential elements have characterized meetings. A typical Network meeting is a mix of whole group discussions, sharings in smaller groups and informal but often serious conversations that happen in between, round and beyond sessions.

In most meetings time and thought has been given to listen to a mixture of positive and troubling experiences, difficulties, learnings and doubts about situations within the schools and communities where people work, and challenges in their own personal life.

These issues ranged from discussions about sending children for different kinds of vocational training, to relooking at the role of work in education. There have been times when people shared about crises in the local community and how they responded, such as in Sittilingi where teachers played an active part in a protest in 2019 over the assault and death of a former girl student, and struggled (with limited success) to hold the various legal bodies accountable for being complicit in a coverup of evidence and protection of the miscreants.

In addition, there have been other activities from swimming to walks, bookmaking to dancing and singing. Discussions usually centre round a theme, sometimes decided in advance. At other times a theme can emerge in the opening session with members voicing a matter of concern from goings-on in the larger community or a specific crisis from their workplace.

There have been people who have acted as sensitive and helpful moderators without being formally nominated and this has often made the discussions more focused and inclusive. More recently there has been a felt need to explicitly ask different people to play that role to ensure that the discussions do not become too scattered or rambling. Presentations and seminar mode have not been typically the form of meeting nor have there been special invitees or experts to give talks, but occasionally there has been a film or recorded talk to prompt further discussion. There was an exception at the Marudam meeting in 2024 when the theme was 'Adivasi Culture and Education'. Narendra[5] was invited to share his experiences of living with tribal

5 Narendra is the author of *Bastar Dispatches* (2018) Noida, U.P., Harper Collins.

communities in the Abujhmad region of Bastar region in Chhattisgarh, for more than three decades, beginning in the 1980s.

Narendra at Marudam, 2024

The purpose of the discussion has never been to reach a consensus but more to listen to each other without feeling the pressure to come to some definitive resolution that we all subscribe to. A question asked by someone who only came once to a meeting was:

> Could it be that in this, the formation of a bond is more important than actually getting anywhere? The formation of relationships which comes from listening to each other is the true purpose rather than actually inquiring into something.

It is not easy to sum up the meeting; it is not just discussions, nor is it only, as someone commented, like a meeting of the Alcoholics Anonymous where people meet as equals to listen and support each other because they share a common problem. It is hopefully more than a social club or echo chamber of likeminded people. At its best it can be a time to challenge each other to question and call into question issues that matter not only to us personally but matter because we are part of a much larger community and a natural world that is endangered.

Freire's thoughts on the meaning of rigour in discussions remains an ideal though not always realized. For Freire 'rigour' means a

discussion that examines the constant movement between reflection and practice. There is a seriousness that wants to probe deeper to understand issues and their implications for the work on the ground.

The work and the personal are not compartmentalized. One person describes the different kind of discussion that happens when people share at multiple levels. “At every meeting, post dinner, time is dedicated to members sharing their lives in the interim period between meetings. This sharing could be a simple catch up but at times a session of very sensitive personal sharing, sometimes emotionally fraught. It is this willingness of members to openly, transparently share their doubts, their difficulties, put themselves “out there” in a small group or the full group.”

Describing what characterizes a typical meeting, the following was shared by Yashodara:

> At times, if the group is too large, or discussions become unwieldy, or only a few voices hold forth, then we break up into smaller groups that allow each one to share, perhaps in the language they are most comfortable with. Efforts have been made to have parallel translation when needed, but increasingly it has been felt that regional groups where the local language is used enable more participation . . .

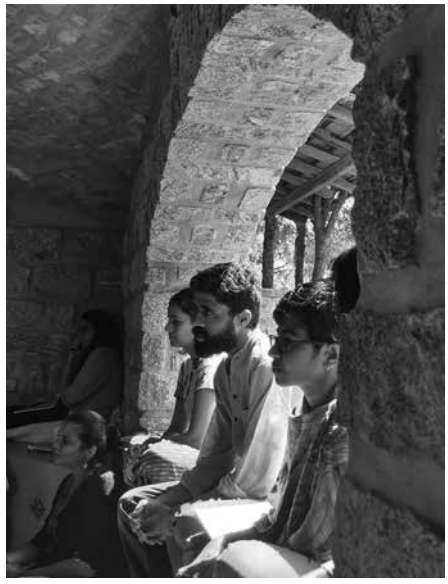
Small group meeting at Shibumi

A number of people have commented on how they felt free to be quiet and not under pressure to speak when they preferred to listen and remain silent. Perhaps the most dramatic instance of this was Raghubabu's declaration, on arrival at the Third Network Meeting, "I am not going to talk!"

Krunal shares about his preference to be a listener when he writes, "I like to listen to people, their journeys, challenges, and learning. I prefer to be a silent listener and often do not feel a strong urge to contribute to the discussions or share my thoughts. I also appreciate people who are able to express their thoughts and build on others' ideas."

I may be silent, but
I'm thinking.
I may not talk, but
don't mistake me for a
wall.

Tsubjoi Shigeji
(1897-1975)



Listening at Shibumi

Some recurring questions

Every so often the question comes up about being more formal in our approach, especially in relation to discussions, and there has been some discomfort that things stay on the surface without going into depth. There is a suggestion that comments are often ill-informed or naïve. There is a tension between being open and receptive to different people's viewpoints on the one hand and being unfocused

on the other. One question is “What do we mean by depth?”
In the early days of the Network Vasant wrote:

> I am aware that there is a feeling that we touch upon many topics, bring them up, but do not go deep into any of them. That we, sort of, skip along. There is also dissatisfaction that the discussions are not conclusive. Those who are eggheads amongst us surely sometimes strongly feel that, intellectually, all the talk that goes on is not very exciting or productive. All these responses are valid and objectively fine. . .
>
> But what I would like to stress is, like the Socratic dialogues, our dialogues/discussions will naturally remain ‘inconclusive’ given our composition. Going into ‘depth’ in an intellectual academic way, is not to be expected. An attempt in that direction is likely to result in most members feeling left out. It is another kind of depth we can really achieve and if we do that, we will have achieved something really good. What Freire calls “Conscientization” and what I take to be an open, collective, shared process of exploration, probing, understanding a word, a topic, an event holistically, from different angles but without losing one’s values, concerns, goals. In a sense, it is the raising the level of awareness through listening to others, through seeing with others’ eyes and so on.[6]

More recently Maxine elaborated on this:

> There probably are two schools of thought among the members. Some people feel that there is a need for the group to examine theoretical issues, while others want to avoid anything that smacks of intellectualism. Occasionally, this difference in point of view has caused tension. In my opinion, this is unfortunate. If we keep in mind the original goal of the Network to deal with injustice and oppression in the social and educational system, we do have to look at theoretical questions. This can be done in a spirit of open inquiry.

6 Vasant Palshikar in ’Thinking Loudly About our Network’.

Ramgopal notes the tension between structure and flexibility, formality and openness:

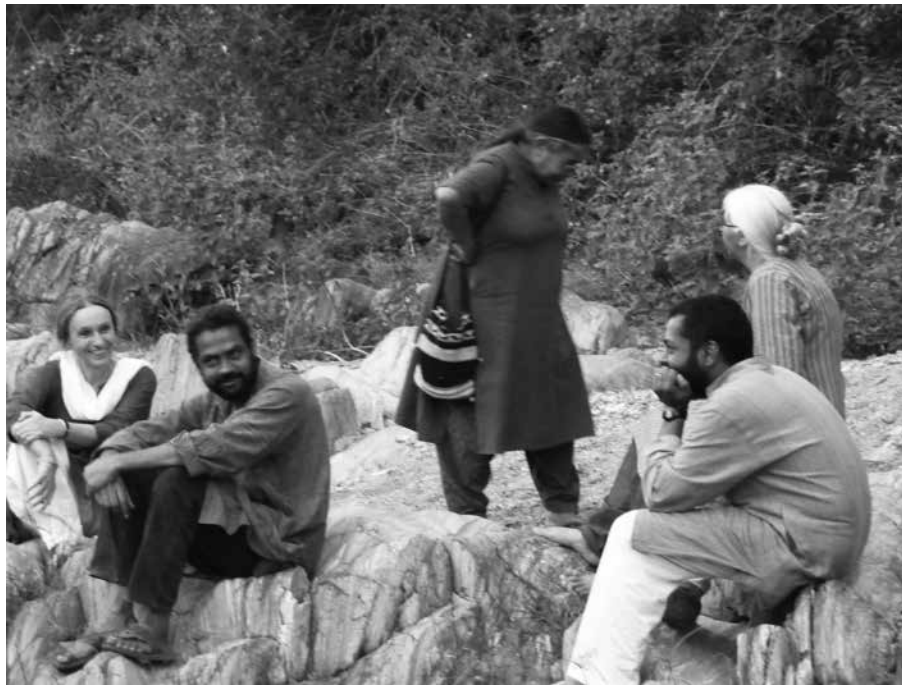
> But I also wonder if that is the nature of this gathering . . . and if we force it to go in a certain direction . . . of fulfilling some agenda the essential nature of it will be lost . . . So, there is the frustration when a discussion does not go deeper or a coming together for a specific purpose diffuses . . . but also a hesitancy to shape it in a certain way.

Krunal notes the organic, unpredictable nature of each meeting. He writes of the uniqueness of different meetings that depends on so many factors, including the venue itself and the people who come. He remarks:

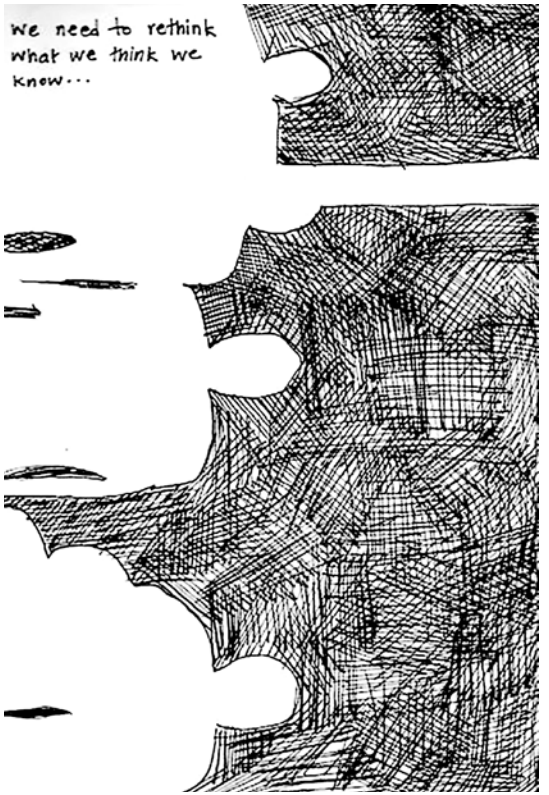
> Even pre-decided themes and questions don't stop people from sharing what they wish to or feel like sharing. I find that very valuable. At times people feel that the discussions are not focused / structured, all-over, not-so-deep, or repetitive. I favour an organic approach that allows things to emerge naturally, and don't mind such uncertainty.

Acknowledging that we expand our horizons through listening to others and 'seeing with others' eyes' is at the core of dialogue which is explored further in the next chapter.

Dhruva and Krunal



Meeting on the rocks at Thulir


we need to rethink
what we think we
know...

5

Elements of the Meetings: Dialogue

The Network meetings have really been a space where dialogue is being practiced, not maybe to perfection, but a serious attempt at it.

Dialogue: lots of silence, wandering, meandering!!

Inspired by the first meeting, troubled by the second, in the third meeting at Alampoondi the members of the Network gained some clarity about shared expectations of how our meetings could take shape. Yasmin, unforgettably, read an extract from David Bohm on dialogue that had been written in 1989.

Bohm's words spoke directly to the group:

> *People will come to a gathering like this from somewhat different cultures or subcultures, with different assumptions and opinions . . . The object of a dialogue is not to analyse things, or to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend opinions and to look at the opinions – to listen to everybody's opinions and to suspend them, and see what all that means . . . Each person is participating, is partaking of the whole meaning of the group and also taking part in it. We can call that a true dialogue.*[1]

1 Excerpt from a seminar given by Dr David Bohm in Ojai, California, in 1989.

Yasmin's drawing our attention to the practice and potential of dialogue brought a major change in the way we conducted the meetings. Such a practice of dialogue did not always emerge but the commitment to that kind of engagement was a guideline for all subsequent meetings.

In response to the question, 'What prompted you to share the extract from David Bohm?' Yasmin wrote:

> I was trying to remember the third meeting. I wasn't there at the second one. I am not sure if I had heard about the meeting. But it was also the third year of CFL, and we were also trying to build communication without structure and hierarchies. So this was something we were reading and trying to use. I think I also wondered what I could bring to the group – you all were so experienced at the social work aspect. So, I think I very tentatively brought this. I am not sure the 'Krishnamurti circles' use it the same way that CFL was doing then, as a blueprint and with hope. It was essential for survival.

Gurveen, in an article for *Edu-Care*, entitled, "A conversation in search of clarity", shared what she felt had been a process of exploration for Network members. She writes:

> We have seriously tried to understand what a dialogue is and what is necessary for it . . . .
>
> Three points that struck me about what David Bohm says about need for dialogue: need for deep or active listening, shared meaning amongst participants, and willingness to be surprised by the truth.
>
> If a dialogue happens . . . something might emerge together which is not even a conscious thing but might still emerge through a real dialogue between participants . . . you are the co-creators of what comes out . . . sometimes it happens very beautifully and sometimes not . . . .
>
> A must for a dialogue is that one has to be open. It is

> important to make a clear distinction between conversation and dialogue . . . maybe it is not equality but a genuine respect for the other that is the real precondition. Also needed is a willingness to listen and to be open to the possibility that the other person can deepen, add to and enrich one's own understanding.[2]

Krishna writes of how Bohm's text was 'a huge revelation' for him. He elaborates on what openness means for him:

> It was exciting to think that a group of people can look at a thought, an idea, together without one's ego coming in the way, analyse and develop the thought together, while adding individual experiences, in a kind of open-ended manner. The process becomes important in itself and there is much scope, space and freedom for an individual to make one's unique understanding of an issue, thought or a question. Though ideas and abstractions excite me, I cannot relate to competitive intellectual processes such as the ones usually found in most seminars, workshops and similar gatherings. This process frees the speaker from having to impress the audience and freely contribute to a flow of a particular idea or thought. What has come as a surprise to me is that this process also is kinder on the listener, letting one participate without the pressure of having to voice an opinion, something many a newcomer to our meetings has remarked upon. It is also a process that helped me to start listening to people speaking. The meetings have been spaces with people of varied interests, inclinations and social, linguistic and educational backgrounds, which while throwing up a lot of challenges, have also made the whole process of 'dialogue' very much richer.

The text has often served as a reminder that that "one does not have to enter into a discussion for the sake of discussion"; in addition, it provided an assurance that debate could mean "one could think aloud or remain a silent listener." Bohm's text became a guideline to newcomers about how meetings were conducted.

2 *Edu-Care* Vol.16 No. 1, 2013, pp. 5-6.

It was not that the way of meeting was entirely unique to the Network but, for many it has been a valuable way of learning to listen to others and to seek not a consensus but a way of reaching towards a fuller and deeper understanding of an issue. Arun mentions the link of dialogical exchange to meetings in the Krishnamurti circle and Maxine likens this idea of meeting to the Quaker style of sharing.[3] She writes:

> To me, a Network session was very much like a Quaker meeting: a group of people sit together in silence until someone is moved to speak. I used to think that it was just by chance that this style of conducting a meeting was so close to that of the Quakers. But recently I realized that Vasant and others had been in close contact with Marjorie Sykes, a Quaker woman settled in Rasulia Friends' Rural Centre, Hoshangabad in Madhya Pradesh.[4] The open, quiet, non-confrontational manner of talking and sharing together fostered ties of friendship that have lasted throughout the years . . . Though the tenor of meetings has varied from time to time, quiet dialogic sharing has continued as the common mode.

Malathi and Neelu

3 The Society of Friends (commonly known as Quakers) was founded in the mid-17th century in England. It is a spiritual community that has no rituals or hierarchy. They believe that everyone is equal and decisions are made by consensus after deliberations and sharing concerns.

4 Marjorie Sykes, a British educationalist, lived and worked in India from the 1920s and was active in the Independence Movement. She was strongly committed to promoting peace and justice. She has written on her engagement with Santiniketan and Sevagram in the pre-Independence era and has also written a biography of Vinoba Bhave. She was invited to the first Network meeting but sadly her ill health did not permit her to attend. She died in 1995.

L.S. Saraswathi remarks that such open communication was not always easy and it was sometimes only in glimpses or flashes that the common elements in the conversation became evident. Nevertheless, she affirms that “the process of dialogue has been the basis for all the themes, issues and questions discussed in our meetings.”

Together at Thulir

Gurveen writes about the distinctive style of discussion:

> This dialogue, with no agenda or objective or need to convince or prove a point is precious . . . One leaves with more questions and issues to follow up, to continue one’s learning and each person’s takeaways are different.
>
> The experience of the meeting involves precious non-competitive, open sharing, listening carefully to each other and reflecting on it – people not rushing to speak or cutting another off as they speak. The silences between where no one rushes to fill the pause, are not uncomfortable. Nor is anyone forced to talk at the sessions till they are ready.

Challenges of dialogue

Ramgopal alerts us to the challenge of dialogue and its demands on us if it is to mean growth in understanding. In the previous chapter a quote from Vasant refers to the nature of dialogue as being essentially inclusive and respectful of each and everyone's voice, not just the articulate or seemingly well-informed.

> Dialogue calls for a lot of maturity in the members engaging in the dialogue, to be reflective to watch one's own reactions as something is being said, to watch these objectively . . . Just NOT expressing the opinions that we are holding or criticism that we are holding doesn't really make a dialogue . . . I wonder if sometimes this makes people not say things /opinions more upfront. Sometimes perhaps cordiality and avoidance of unpleasantness take priority over going deeper. . . Maybe, there is a tendency to even avoid difficult situations and tension.

This raises the question whether dialogue can sometimes become an avoidance of confrontation in an effort to reach some kind of polite middle ground. In contrast, Maurice Friedman, who, wrote extensively on the life and writings of Martin Buber, defines 'authentic dialogue' as an encounter when "one can be truly open and ready to meet others only if one stands on the ground of one's uniqueness and deepens that ground through each new meeting."[5]

5 *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* M.S. Friedman,1960, New York: Harper Torchbook

There have, inevitably, over the years been occasions of tension and difference whether on an ideological position such as prioritizing systemic change over piecemeal, small scale endeavours or decision making about the functioning of the Network. The bigger issues are complex and multilayered and continue to be open to discussion. Swetha recalls a recent occasion where one person felt a unilateral decision on a practical matter had been taken without due consideration but a resolution was reached after an open discussion.

> It was at the CFL meeting that for the first time I witnessed tension because of the change in venue for the 2023 meeting. The trust and openness in the exchanges was a beautiful thing to witness. It not only increased my respect for the individuals, but also made me realise that there is space for disagreement within the group.

Following the meeting on Creativity at Thulir in 2019 Jane wrote about how dialogue is not a strategy or technique but has the uncertainty and discomfort of any creative venture that risks new beginnings or a shift into the unfamiliar.

> One 'take-away' for me was a sense of how relentlessly demanding the practice of dialogue is. David Bohm writes that it is "a flowing through" amongst people and not an exchange as in a game of ping-pong! He writes, "the spirit of the dialogue is not competition, but it means if we find something new, then everybody wins." Our Network is so diverse in every sense – age, language, temperament, styles of speaking or being silent, interests and histories – that our sharings do not always flow but stop and start, twist and turn and sometimes toss us out of our complacency and comfort zone from things we thought we knew. I have been thinking how creativity and dialogue are so closely intertwined.

"Real dialogue is where two or more people become willing to suspend their certainty in each other's presence."

David Bohm

Tanu

6

Elements of the Meetings: Themes for Discussion

Experience, analysis and action flow into one another
and so should our meetings, no?

Indira

"Questions are as important as the answers!"

Lata Mani in *Laxman's Questions*

Taking a particular theme for discussion has been a significant part of most meetings. More than one person has commented on the distinctive nature of the discussions that followed.

> The theme session with space for collective, reflective enquiry is special. Where else do we have such a space for learning and reflecting together as an education community? To dialogue, to raise questions, to think through dilemmas and issues . . . to take the time to dwell upon experiences and thoughts of the members . . . and share different perspectives to broaden and deepen understanding. And to do all this with an openness and the lack of a need to convince another or prove a point – unlike academic seminars and conferences where one presents a paper and leaves, and where very few come to listen or learn or engage. Most importantly to truly listen, to understand and to learn.
>
> **Gurveen**

The range of issues discussed

Many discussions have emerged out of a common concern about the state of education at the present time. Yashodara wrote,

> Over the years, in our meetings I have heard many serious concerns voiced about one-size-fits-all kind of factory schools; the all-out competition and discrimination etc., that such schools inculcate; how administrative decisions are arbitrary and coming from a top-down administration; school curricula that denounce, ignore, even erase dialects, community customs and local history; school policies that disregard significant local, cultural and geographical factors that affect children's lives, leading to very low learning outcomes and increased drop-out rates. This often results in unemployed and unskilled rural youth who after school are unwilling to do agriculture or ply family trades.

Themes have varied from more obviously pedagogical subjects such as "The Teacher as Learner" to broader aspects of education including "Freedom and Discipline," "Play as Learning," "Sustainable Education" and "The Relationship of the Community to the School." Problems of growing communalism, environmental degradation and the prospect of jobless growth have all been subjects that have been touched upon. Other themes that have been taken up include "Spirituality," "Hope," "Understanding Violence," "Dissent," and most recently, "Tribal Education".

Building on a theme

Some of the themes have led to an exploration into what is meant by alternative schooling. In the Report following the discussion on Spirituality and Education at the Visthar Meeting in 1997 the question posed was:

> Could we say that the education we have in mind is, above all else, grounded in a qualitatively different way of relating to oneself and also relating to 'others' in the world? The 'others'

include the animate and inanimate world of which we are a part. The word ‘spirituality’ was used with these questions in mind.

The Report (Network 5) goes on to document Rajan’s presentation of a Buddhist approach, in which he concluded with challenging questions:

> We need to ask ourselves the question, in what way are we really different? Is it enough if we lay stress on social consciousness and social commitment if the mind is left self-cherishing? Can we really do alternative education if our own minds are all caught up in some one or the other worldly refuge? We have to help children to learn ways of cultivating a ‘mind of great compassion’. Do we see this as our task? And, if we do, are we ourselves adequate to the task?

The question of what spirituality means in the classroom was explored by looking at the quality of relationships, ritual and the celebration of festivals, identity and self-forgetfulness, and the place of stories within or beyond a particular tradition. The Report shows clearly that there were widely different points of view on this particular topic. A definitive consensus was neither reached nor expected, but there were clear signs of building together a more nuanced and layered understanding of the subject.

One fragment of the discussion on meditation in the school context is given below. It shows how diverse threads can be drawn together to create a larger picture.

> Narasimhan raised a question:
>
> In continuation of our concern for the dimension of spirituality in schools, how can we bring meditation into our teaching? Narasimhan didn’t mean keeping some time for meditation in the timetable. He meant how could learning and teaching be meditation? Is that feasible at all?
>
> Malathi related the story of a Buddhist monk, an excellent carpenter, who migrated to another part of China where

people spoke a different dialect. He soon became very popular, even though he didn't speak the local language, because whoever visited him was overwhelmed by the perfection of his products. Malathi suggested that the way he worked could be called a form of meditation.

Vasant said that there is an expression in Marathi which, rendered into English, would be 'He is in a state of self-realisation (samadhi)'. This expression is used when you find a person totally at one with whatever he is working at, overcoming or losing his I-ness completely as a result. The word samadhi does not only indicate the full engrossment of that person while working; there is also not an iota of self-consciousness of the 'I' doing it. It seemed to Vasant that Narasimhan had this state of the teacher in mind. Perhaps one can say that when both the teacher and the children lose their I-ness and there is only learning/doing going on, they are in a state of samadhi. Would that be meditation as teaching?[1]

"Understanding History"

The Report of the 2002 Network Meeting 10 at CFL at Vardanahalli provided a detailed description of the discussion and elaborated further on the theme. The meeting focused on "Understanding History." The topic was chosen in response to the growing threat of communalism and the way history text books were being re-written to change the narrative to promote a certain kind of 'single story'. The Report included an account of the discussions (greatly enriched by Diba's drawings) which focused on bias in history, addressing prejudice, idealization in history, is there 'a right view of history?', Can we learn about the present by looking at the past? This led to a heated discussion on the issue of national identity in a globalized world. The Report also had "Later Reflections" on the discussions by some members. In addition, there were several accounts of teaching history in the classroom. A poem by Zulfikar Ghosh plus two articles by freelance writers who were not directly involved in the Network, on the subject of history and violence and spirituality were presented.

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1 This discussion was reported in Network 5 pp. 42-3.

The Report also included Shivaji's memories of his childhood and the kind of discrimination he had to face.

In the following pages are some excerpts from the Network Meeting 10, as captured by Swetha. The issues raised left us with many questions to think about.

Some of the many faces of dissent

The conversation about dissent and protest at the 2018 Meeting looked at various aspects of the topic – from differences within the family to political resistance in the face of injustice and also the overshadowing of dissent by arrogance or conviction. An exchange between Ramdas and Yasmin – from an earlier meeting summed up the dilemma of the real demands of "speaking up" in the face of threat:

Yasmin quoted the social activist and writer, Dominique Christina:

> "Revolution is the sound of your heart still beating and
> as long as it is, you have work to do.
> Do it. Without apology.
> Do it. Bravely and nobly.
> Do it. Exist, insist, and by all means, resist."

Ramdas responded:

> "Easy to say, do it bravely, but things get quite difficult. Those are the times when you think of, if you should do it or not."

Dissent can take many forms from making particular choices, to silence, to active resistance in the face of pressure and public non-violent protest in the form of marches or 'dharnas'.

Some shared about the tension in the family when unconventional paths were chosen. Tanu's drawing entitled 'To stay with Love' captures one such journey of dissent from family expectations.

Who should write history ?

How does one write a history that accepts the fact of Partition with a just and fair view of the wrongs done by all parties, including the British in the spirit of forgiveness and amity, and a vision of the future wherein the three nation states of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh live as friendly neighbours with the shared understanding of our common history till partition ?

UNDERSTANDING HISTORY

History is a record of things that never happened, written by people who weren't there.

Is history only a record of power struggles —can we include a history of powerlessness that has countered oppression ?

Reading history textbooks currently used in schools, I would say, following Goethe, they end up being collected rubbish "Historical facts do not get generated into a "living plant"".

There's a lot more history in people's lives ...

Each one carries his or her own bias — so what is the goal we are aiming at? Which interpretation is correct?

An essential part of learning history should be to enable children to look critically at bias...

True, but what if we ourselves are carrying a strong bias?

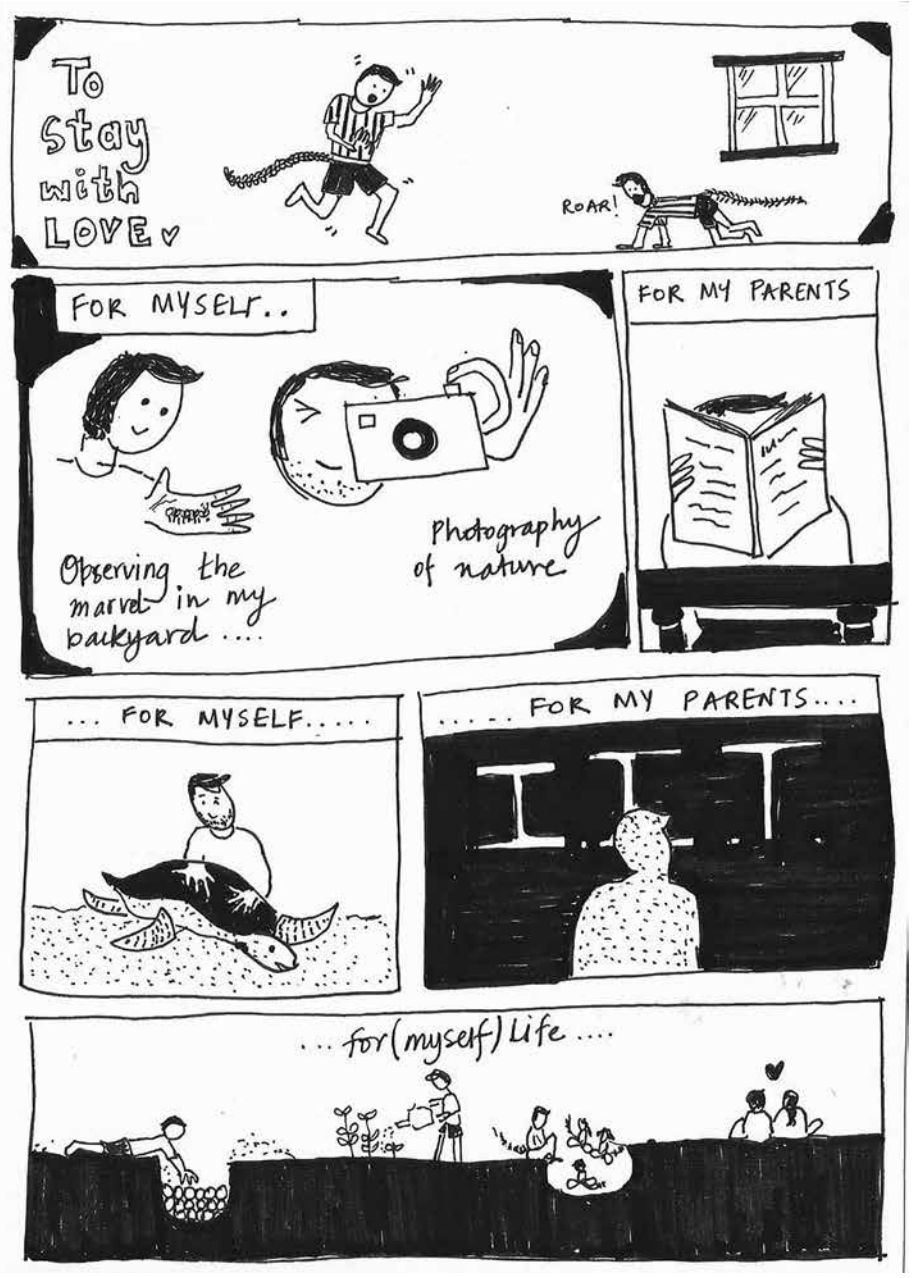
We need to be open to examining our own biases...

How do we forge our identities?
What use are mine to me?
Since identity is both a source of rootedness and division at the same time.
How do we decide when it is more harmful?

I'm worried that there's a leap between a local identity and a global one with nothing in between.

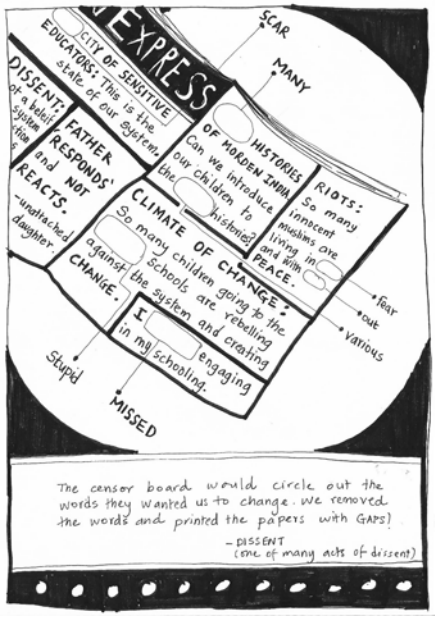
The ambivalence and shadow side of heroes ? How can we include the profiles of "ordinary" people's lives?

Aspects of dissent



Tanu

Dissent can also mean resisting a single identity imposed by the larger society. Yasmin recalled a conversation when a stranger tried in vain to label her.



As mentioned, dissent can take many forms and one person mentioned a refusal to change what had been written in a newspaper to conform to the demands of censorship.

Ankita made links between the subject of dissent and everyday classroom practice:

> One of the questions that stuck with me was how can our education system . . . no, how can our time in the classrooms with children be a response to everything else that is happening in the world on political and environmental fronts? How can what we do in the classrooms be a form of resistance?

Mixed responses to theme based discussions

Predictably, the impact of these discussions has been differently experienced. For one it was the sense of being "left with questions" and a prompt to probe further. For Yashodara the meetings have been formative:

> Just being in meetings over the years has given me a realistic, layered and complex understanding of a range of issues, possibilities, of the consequences and effects, both intended and unintended, of regular schooling on different kinds of communities. I have been able to glimpse the widely different attempts by Network members in their schools to address gaps and ill-effects of mainstream schooling; and I have also been able to see how some teachers simply responded in a totally organic and creative way to opportunities and situations they faced in their respective *karmabhoomis.*

For some the theme is not the most vital part of the Meeting; it is the meeting with people that has been more significant. One person described themes as "only anchors for discussion" that provide "the safe space that helps members share their thoughts, reflections, and challenges without being judged and being vulnerable". Ramgopal describes his mixed feelings:

> In the earlier years I would think of the gathering as a place to engage with a theme and discuss and deepen understanding. Some parts of the discussions would be engaging but often I would find myself wandering away . . . Also, I personally find the discussions in the years I have attended not really going in depth. They go off on tangents or are diffused . . . So over the years I see the Meeting more as a space to get to know people, engage people in one-on-one conversations . . .

The idea of choosing a theme for discussion has met with mixed responses from indifference to a strong commitment to research further. The themes have usually been selected in a democratic way, arising organically from what had emerged during prior exchanges or a response to the immediate political context. For some people a free-flowing discussion emerging from experiences in the workplace

has been a more meaningful form of sharing views than taking an abstract theme.

For Meenakshi the idea of discussions altogether felt irrelevant:

> I always felt that raising questions in a meeting was futile because we don't have control over what is happening in the real world. I am not a person who questions unless I have a solution that I can implement. I believe that the only person that needs to change is me. That change ripples out from my centre, so the questions I need to raise are how I can change myself further. Raising questions about society is not my forte. And therefore, discussing what is the change required is also not something that I can do. Change within me is the only thing I have control over. That is the only space that I must keep clear of ambiguity.

But she also added:

> I hold very dear the memory of Vasantdada's talk about making a silent revolution through our work. That talk got me going in the direction that I would not have taken because of my lack of confidence in my own ideas. But after that talk I felt that in a revolution each person must do what they are capable of . . .

One person expressed a sense of tedium in discussing the same themes over and over again as younger people started being part of the Network. There is also a sense of very different underlying positions and perhaps a hesitation to probe too deeply. Yet another remarked that whatever the theme, there is a natural tendency to come back to the most difficult and challenging questions in a meaningful way.

Preparing for a discussion on a theme

Looking at the earlier reports preparation and post reflection on particular themes were an integral part of some of the meetings. Further, Tanu commented that a theme could be "a lens to look at something through the year and not limited to the meeting alone".

More recently a number of people have lamented the lack of serious preparation round a topic through more organized shared readings and writings. Over time there have been concerted efforts to open up discussions on particular themes not only through the writings of others but also through sharing thoughts. There has been some ambivalence about veering towards this more intellectual approach. For example, some found a shared reading activity unhelpful while others, such as Gurveen, appreciated it. Gurveen writes as follows:

> At Naimisam, Hyderabad, at one morning session we all just sat silently reading through many different papers on the theme and at the end of the hour, writing down whatever thoughts or questions that the reading evoked in us. I recall that the quality of those questions, statements and observations perhaps went deeper than many/some of our discussions. Without any preparatory discussion the session was just a quiet reflective reading, nothing more. The prior discussion made for a meaningful, intense and beautiful experience.

In the recent meeting at CFL (May 2023) there was a kind of consensus that it would be helpful to share select articles and thoughts on a chosen theme before the meeting. It was felt that a commitment to follow up after the meeting to bring together ideas or experiences related to a particular theme would also be of use to deepen and further the enquiry.

“How can we support children to live more sustainably?”

Shreekumar

Another aspect of taking a theme has been to draw on very different sources including poems and stories alongside particular experiences and reflections of others beyond the group. Most recently Shreekumar read a story by Charles Eisenstein on the market economy which sparked an interesting discussion not only on economics but also the nature of story.[2]

Towards a discussion on creativity

One effort to prepare for discussion that was appreciated by all was the publication of *Edu-Care* (Vol. 29. No.1) which was devoted to the topic of Creativity. About seven people from the Network had contributed to the edition and all participants agreed that this enabled a much richer discussion. Krishna commented:

> The theme discussions went off very well this time around. I felt that the bumper issue of *Edu-Care* on the theme of creativity helped get our discussions to take off really well and there was a sense of the group having prepared well. Looking back, I think the fact of the hard copy of the issues being in one's hand and kept in a pile in the middle of the hall, perhaps had a very reassuring and supportive effect on our collective subconsciousness . . .
>
> For me personally, I went into the meeting with thoughts on the creative process as being one of creating with others, communally, which is very much the reality of what creating Architecture is, to me. I was wondering what other dimensions I could discover through the theme discussions. At the end of the meeting, I realized that the creative process could be grounded in the idea "to care" in a deep way.

Aspects of creativity visualised by Swetha from the discussion on the following pages:

2 Charles Eisenstein "Money A new Beginning" https://charleseisenstein.org/essays/money-a-new-beginning-part-1/

For imagination to grow one needs a kind of space where the mind can wander freely, not in a given time. We could all do with some 'do-nothing time'

Ownership in creativity... what is its role ?
- Tanu

For me, our entire life is surrounded by creative processes. It is a way of living. It is an expression of a particular ideology. A person who decides to use minimum resources uses them creatively. A person who dares to live differently, finds out his/her own lifestyle creatively.
- Neelu

The image, for me, is of the woodworker meeting a knot in the wood, not to remove it, but to encompass it.
- Jane

Feminist movements are to me one of the most creative processes because all the omen who are involved have challenged power creatively and have continued bringing care and nurturance to their responsibilities as they go about their daily lives.
- Poornima

Whenever constraints are pushed to their boundaries and sometimes beyond, that's when interesting new creations come about.
- Krishna

Creativity not as novelty, not being unique or different but as natural unboundedness that frees...
- Yashodara

It is our job as teachers to help children to think the unthinkable and imagine the unimaginable.
- Ramdas*

Is a crisis needed to be creative?

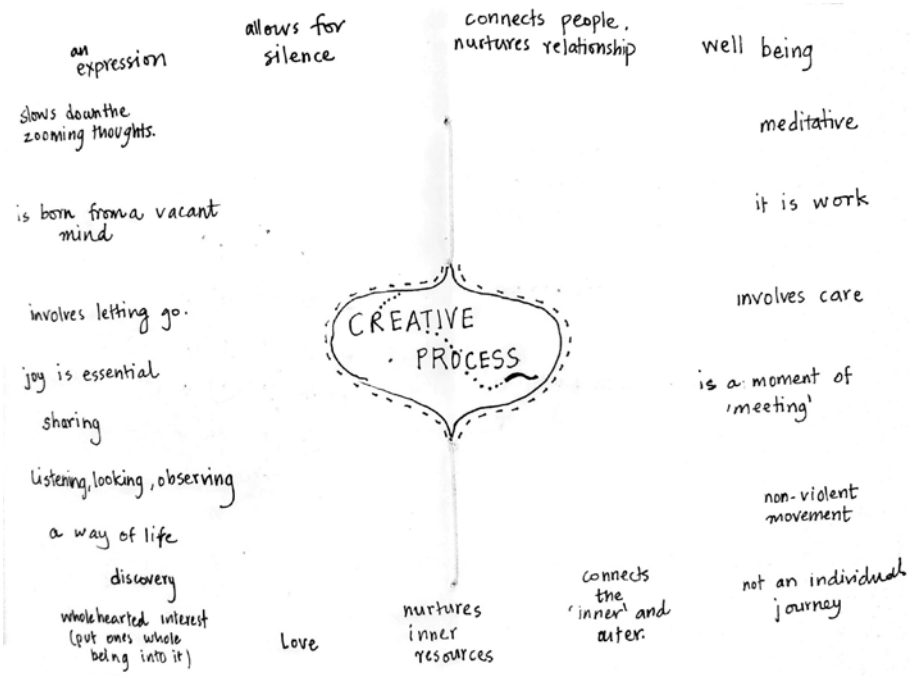
Is novelty a must have feeling to be creative

At the heart of creativity is care ...
-Indira

Two stories have stayed in my mind since the meeting: Shivaji's account of the march – largely when women – from Belgaum to Bangalore in protest about the government's collusion in providing easy access to alcohol ; and the other about events at Siitilingi where people came together to sit on the road through the night in an effort to secure justice. We usually think of creativity as an individual even solitary activity, but these two examples show how power was collectively challenged in a creative way, that is, if by creativity we mean a willingness to pose questions, face uncertainty and vulnerability and be totally engaged in a process for the greater good when the outcomes are not predictable.
- Jane

Note: Quotes marked * are taken from *Edu-Care,* Vol. 20 No.1 2019

Thoughts about the creative process



Excerpt from Tanu's diary

. . . Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Mary Oliver

After the discussions

Informal feedback in the form of letters and emails have contributed to crystallizing some of the discussions. Some reports have elaborated on these responses and added to the discussions by including further material for reflection and action. These reports

have been uneven in length and varied in content but a number have gone far beyond just recording the discussions. Some have included additional material related to the theme in the form of articles or the documentation of classroom experiences, poems, more extended reflections by individual members, cartoons and news of the different schools.

Conclusion

In all the discussion about whether to have a theme or not, whether to prepare or not, how to document what we have shared, it is clear from the notes above that meaningful and reflective, sometimes divisive discussions have deepened our awareness on many issues that are relevant to our lives and work.

Yasmin commented that whatever the theme, we will come round to discussing what is actually significant for us.

Wall painting at Thulir

Mural created by the Thulir community

7

Elements of the Meetings: Not Only Discussions

> Part of the lure of the Network Meeting is being with people who I think of as my soul family or tribe and the respite of being in a community where one doesn't need to explain or justify or prove oneself. Three days of good-natured banter, discussing and collectively reflecting on what we are doing, constructive feedback and questions, sharing experiences and personal stories late into the night... the warmth, the fun, laughter and camaraderie and the songs and serious, sincere engagement.
>
> **Gurveen**

The greeting and parting hugs!

Many of the respondents to the questionnaire mentioned memorable moments of magical and scary encounters with nature, observation of new practices in the schools, introduction to new ideas and activities, the taste of local dishes, exposure to a different kind of architecture and appropriate technology, engagement in particular conversations and the sheer enjoyment of swimming, dancing and singing.

Being together

> The journey itself is often where the meeting begins and ends.

Krunal and Shivaji

Gurveen expresses the joy of just meeting together:

> Each meeting begins with faces lighting up and almost everyone running to greet/meet each person coming in. And, invariably, each meeting ends with unfinished conversations, lingering good-byes and promises of visits or continuing the conversations at the next meeting.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Krishna calling everyone for lunch
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Meal times are a rowdy babble of individuals catching up in ones, twos, threes, or a heated continuation of the ideas just discussed in the meeting. Times when we help the host-school with cleaning or kitchen chores, evening walks, tea breaks, any free times become venues for lively sharing, singing, learning songs. Even bedtime is stretched to accommodate sharing incidents, jokes and stories. All these formal and informal sessions undeniably help strengthen our bonds and connections with each other.

Tanu

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

The Silences . . . there is something very powerful about them – where there is almost some strong sense of the awareness of the moment in the flow of time of a group of people trying to be together and make sense and try and hang in there with affection . . . in a profoundly sick world.

Elephants, boars and fireflies . . .

The elephants and wild boar outside the rooms.
The jeep ride to Gundalpet to catch the bus at 4 in the morning, and driving through bison.

Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary
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Tree walk with Arun at Adyar, 2018

As I write this, what flashes before my eyes is standing below a wild badam tree that was fruiting, with Yasho and Gurveen and all of us marvelling at nature.

Krishnamurthi Study Centre, Hyderabad

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Arun patiently coaxing the petrified puppy to lose his fear, to begin wagging its tail and become friends.

Arun's walks . . . his infectious love of nature. His anguish on seeing a dead turtle . . . pointing out the flock of many migrating flamingos flying overhead . . . his dedication to protect the Olive Ridley turtle.

The turtle walk through the night in which most of us took part was simply extraordinary.
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

The moon was almost full; not sure if it was waxing or waning. I didn't want to look away from the land for too long for the fear of missing out on the turtle crawling up to the beach. I expected to see them thronging to the beach unaware of us lot who have come to see them. Little did I expect to see just three dead ones and wondering if there is anything scarier than humans for these creatures.

After a long walk, and much guilt,
we witnessed half of the miracle —the turtle's nest
with about a hundred eggs freshly laid by an Olive Ridley

The turtle walk on the beach in Adyar, Chennai, as remembered by Swetha

Being on top of beautiful rocks at CFL and the hills at Shibumi!

Recollections of particular schools

> I remember it as a place of tremendous hope and, Malathi's energy just poured out into everyone.
>
> **Vikasana, Bengaluru, 1996, 1997**

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It was a treat for all my senses: low, airy mud-thatch structures, bamboo lattices, moving sunlight and shadows in different shapes, Anu's rangoli on the mud plaster floor, unexpected paintings in earthy colours, the brilliant tree with yellow flowers, jewelled beetles scuttling around, the busy huddle around Diba cutting paper, stitching books, the glorious sky at dusk, visiting Shaktivel's mud-house in Sittilingi.
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The smell of the cow dung on the mud floor, turmeric aroma in the pit loos, morning wood fire faithfully making potfuls of bath water, snack delights of all kinds: millet cookies, giant groundnut laddus, crisp khakras, smells of Tamil-style rasam, papads, hot dosai with peanut chutney.

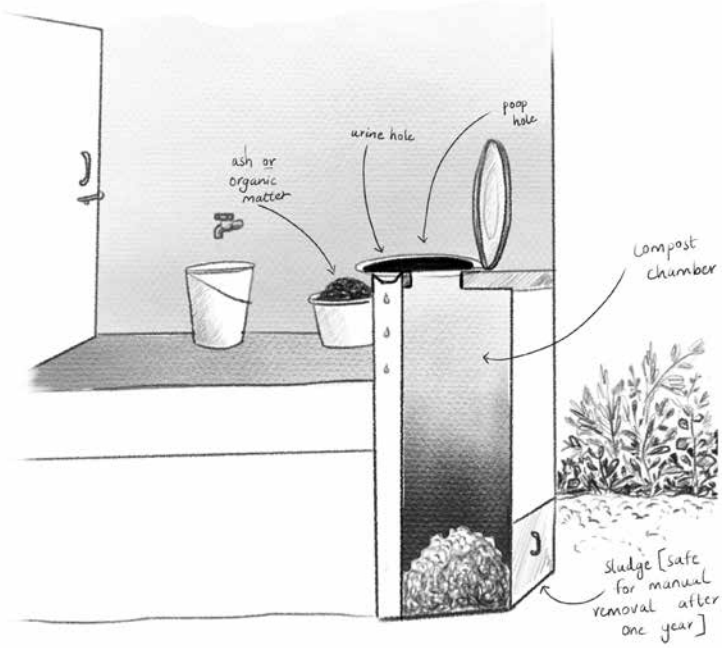
One special memory for me is going to the newly made school at Thulir and meeting with some of the children and the teachers and feeling the energy and hope of fresh beginnings.

Visiting the new school building in Thulir

Learning, making and doing

To see such beautifully designed spaces and . . . the most elegant and beautiful toilet at Anu and Krishna's house.

Plan for a dry toilet at Thulir.



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Neelu spinning

Vidya showed me how she was composting and that was the first time I heard of the concept.

Aksharnandan, Pune

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Looking at the way of mulching and being introduced to ideas of permaculture at Venkat's farm.

Pache Saale, Pastapur

The swims in the stream in the forests in Sittilingi . . . and then going hunting for paniyaram . . . The multiple swims with Vidyatai and Jane in the Marudam well!

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Dancing with the kids – the music, the jubilation— it was a celebration of life!

Kanavu, Wayanad, 1999

Dancing in a circle with Rama showing us some steps from the Gudalur Tribal community.

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I still remember the sessions Jane planned for us . . . We were asked to pick things from a collection and write a letter to it and a reply to ourselves/oneself. Two exercises but very surprising and I think it made even me a little imaginative in my response!

Sita School, Bengaluru, 2007

Sharing some thoughts on the Belgaum meeting, held in 2016 . . . It was, for me, one of the most beautiful meetings. The engagement with actual physical work for creating a community resource along with our deep deliberations brought in the much needed balance. Vasant Rao's presence was both awe inspiring and touching. Shivajidada's simplicity and grounded sharing in the actual context of his work was so very meaningful.

I felt that the act of working together was a powerful way to step outside our own constructed ideas about self, labour, community, age, class, nature, education . . . Such a relief actually to get away from the blah, blah, blah that characterizes our meetings. It was closer to meditation, perhaps a form of meditation itself.

I got the opportunity to see how the group whom we joined, ostensibly to 'help', accommodate us city people like we were children, to later

understand how the work groups were actually kin groups, so each family was contributing labour to the common resource in publicly visible ways. I also remember feeling painfully embarrassed on realizing that the banal colours were coded according to the family groups and that I had randomly crossed lines. I am recalling now the fabulous meal we were served after the physical labour and then how special was the cool water from another well created by Shivajidada's work. Maybe this is what Gandhian education was aspiring to be.

Recollected by Indira, January 2024

Night . . . the comfortable silences, the midnight teas . . .

The dormitory where our children Subhash and Harsha played on the bunk beds with Binit watching wistfully.

Theppakadu, Gudalur, 1993

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The nights before bedtime had a lot of sharings. Especially about ghost and paranormal experiences. It was a lot of fun.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

All of us bundled up in rows of beds!

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Sitting on our mattresses and having long arguments on caste that went late into the night.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Many of us sleeping in the waiting room at Sevagram Railway station waiting for the train delayed by heavy winter fog.

Anand Niketan, Sevagram, 2010

A patchwork of memories

With thanks from Palakneeti Diwali issue 2024 artist Ramakant Dhanokar

Vasant and I ruminating whether all the efforts would come to naught.

Pache Saale, Pastapur, 1994

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Listening to Saraswatiakka's exemplary life and work that continues to be her passion . . . But also listening to Saraswathiakka's story of her running away from home as a young girl but looking back hoping that someone was following her!

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

The Mysore meeting in Tara Gopinath's little school – where late into the night with very little light (maybe candles) we sat quietly sharing our journeys.

Purna Pragna, Mysore, 2003

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Sitting with Janaki Iyer (from Ananda Bharathi) and listening to her talk about the girls in her school and seeing a kind of deep devotion for them.
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Saraswathi's riddle

Flowers and the bees

In a village there was a lotus pond.
In the pond, a few lotus flowers were in full bloom.
A few bees came humming.

Each bee tried to sit on one flower. One bee was left without a flower. Hence the bees sat in pairs on each flower. One bee was left without a flower.

How many flowers were there ?
How many bees came ?

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Sitting on the steps of the step-well at Marudam and listening to Anuradha's story of meeting Janaki Iyer and her early days of teaching at Ananda Bharathi.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Prayaag's ghost story – oh what an amazing storyteller he is !

The story of the mouse who wanted to leave home to explore the world read by Jane in the Chennai meeting. (From *Fables* by Arnold Lobel)

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The vivid image I hold is that of Arun in a sari at Chennai that spoke volumes without a single word.
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Tanu tucked away somewhere capturing the event in her unique sketching and writing style . . . her doodles.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Poornima's uninhibited laughter

Every meeting in every place!

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

I particularly loved what Indira shared about the challenge or possibility of connecting with the humanness of perpetrators (of violence) as Gandhi had done after Noakhali and Harsh Mander had done after Nirbhaya. After this I made a fresh commitment to the space and to work with everyone towards nurturing this beautiful, inclusive space for reflection.

Thulir, Sittilingi, 2011, 2019

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Ramdas Anna came out with this brilliant and timely quote from Martin Luther King Jr. I don't know how you found the quote just like that, Anna. It gave a total new perspective and after that there was such deep reflective sharing. I was very deeply moved.

And some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we must speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.[1]

Along with the pattern common to all – or at least most – of the meetings, there were a few meetings that were particularly memorable. The Belgaum meeting was special in every which

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1 Extract from" Beyond Vietnam ~ A Time to Break Silence", Delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr.4 April 1967, Riverside Church, New York City.
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

way. I had a chance to meet Shivajidada and look at the work in his village and in the process get a lifelong friend and a wonderful human being. This is the standout meeting for me. The leaky roof in Devagiri to which we all adjusted without any hesitation.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Some people wrote of their memories of Vasant and the effort he made to come even after he had suffered a stroke and was severely limited in his mobility and unable to speak loudly.

Vasant and Ramdas

The care taken for Vasantdada.

The reception that the people of Belgaum gave to Vasant when they carried him to the workplace . . . that will remain in all our minds for a long, long time.

Vasant speaking in a low voice about his vision for the Network at the meeting in Thulir, 2019.
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

The songs we sing . . .

The next thing that comes to mind is the songs. At each meeting we enjoy our old favourites and new songs, and new singers get added. The songs — each one with meaningful lyrics and wonderful tunes — capture the spirit, philosophy, values, and emotions of the Network.

We've been blessed by many good singers with lovely voices that have lent such beauty and meaning to our meetings. Amrita Patwardhan, Neelu Apte — so many songs especially "Ragini", "Is liye", "Sadhana" and many, many more . . . Malathi singing the pickle song/poem and some of the poems

Ramgopal playing the *ghatam-matka*

and songs she had learned from David Horsburgh, and Tara (many melodious Kannada songs) Rama's fisherman's songs, Diba and Madhura's songs . . . At one Network Meeting Nikhil's singing that filled the hall we were sitting in, and at another time the beauty of Harish's voice, Ramgopal's "Yugan", "A Song is Somewhere to Begin", and so many other songs plus his stunningly beautiful whistling while playing the guitar, Amit singing with his mouth organ, and guitar and self-made musical instrument . . . Maxine's singing. And Swetha and Dhruva reading out poems together at one meeting about the caterpillar and different insects. I am sure I have missed out on some people.

Ramgopal, Amit and Poornima

> I recall Amit and Ram's singing and everyone joining in. I had no idea of the songs or the lyrics and was in absolute wonderment of how everyone seemed to know the songs! And then I realised, everyone did not. But everyone knew to enjoy it nevertheless in total abandon.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Gurveen shared her memories of just how central singing was to each meeting.

> Over the years I have been thinking about the songs we sing at the Network meetings. Almost all NGO's sing at their gatherings. I wonder when such singing started, possibly with Gandhi and his prayers and other motivational songs . . .
>
> So, I have always wondered whether there is anything different about our songs. Looking back, I think our first singers were Malathi, Tara and Amrita Patwardhan. It was from Amrita we learnt songs on the Narmada – "Ma Reva" (not the Indian Ocean version).
>
> Then Neelu appeared and we were all blown away by her
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

songs and her singing. She had such an impact that we wanted her to go around to all our schools and spend one or two weeks in each, teaching and learning songs. Neelu would often close the meeting with her song – “Sadhana”. It went so deep that the words and tune remained with us long after we parted.

These last few meetings we have had Amit and Ram singing Kabir songs and singing them beautifully. I for one go on listening to them as I have managed to record them. And now we have Madhura’s beautiful rendition of Amir Khusro . . . and Diba had followed it up with “Allahu”! Thankfully I have both! These and others like the ones Neelu sings are not songs for me anymore, rather they are anthems.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Gurveen resting in the window seat
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Anu on the slide at Tiruvannamalai Park

Poster from Sevagram

8

Looking Inwards, Reaching Outwards

It is a superstition and ungodly thing
to believe that an act of majority
binds a minority.
Many examples can be given
in which acts of majorities will be found to be wrong
and those of minorities to have been right.
All reforms owe their origin to the initiative of minorities
in opposition to majorities.

M.K. Gandhi

Education which allows us to stay indifferent to violence
and war is no education at all.

Krishna Kumar

In this document there have been many references to a solidarity within the Network and expressions of relief at finding support and encouragement from like-minded people. The Network has variously been described as a family, a *biradari,* a community of fellowship. However, from the very first meeting there has been a challenge – first voiced by Satish Sabarwal – that the group should not become complacent, isolate itself or, most problematic, assume a sense of moral superiority.

Ramgopal sums up this dilemma:

> I can imagine when people choose paths that are so off the beaten track, it's so hard to find other people to share, reflect and even vent our disgruntlement with the larger world. When we do find a group that we can belong to, it comes as space

> for intellectual stimulation and also great solace . . . but the same space runs the risks of becoming an ‘echo chamber’.

An ‘echo chamber’ serves to strengthen an identity that is often reinforced by distancing or dismissing those who are not part of the group. It may be prone to limiting self-criticism and denying a continuous process of honest appraisal, whereby the members of the group can challenge each other or be questioned by those not included in the group.

Ramgopal asks:

> Do we still have the space to point to each other and at the same time hold the space for each other? Or do we not bring up the uncomfortable in the fear that we lose this little small space that is the only one where we feel we belong?

A chapter, entitled ‘Righteousness’ from Charles Eisenstein’s book, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible*[1], probes into some of the complexities of ‘othering’ people and the need to feel on the right and virtuous side of any issue. Eisenstein’s question, “Are you willing to take a look at how much of your belief system is a giant game of upholding a positive self-image?” helps us to address other questions such as “What are the roots of the need to take moral high ground and the tendency to see others as somehow inadequate, ill-informed or insensitive?”

As Eisenstein argues, there is a problem when we make ourselves the center of reference; disarmingly, this is true whether it is a positive or negative comparison! He writes, “Positive and negative judgments alike hold oneself as a tacit reference point (‘lazy’ means “lazier than me” and ‘responsible’ means “responsible like me”). The opposite of seeking self-gratification is when in a dialogue the self is put into question and where humility and vulnerability seem closely connected. It is difficult for us to admit that we may be mistaken in our judgements and to be aware that always and inevitably our vision is limited.

---

1 C. Eisenstein, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible,* Indore: Banyan Tree, 2015.

Self-righteousness is surely one of the things that works most against dialogue and Eisenstein argues very convincingly about the negative impact that it makes in any kind of encounter. As he points out, it is a form of aggression which antagonizes others and polarizes the discussion. Dialogue is tested when it is not so much in the context of like-minded people, but with those we might have serious differences with.

Tanu

In response to Eisenstein's comments Ramgopal wrote in relation to the Network's exchanges:

> I don't even know if it's pragmatic to expect a group that comes together once a year to be able to attempt anything like this . . . and I wonder if at all a group can come together for reasons beyond that of belonging, acceptance to really intensely enquire into the truth and if mutual respect and trust can help us do that and still sail through the surely rough weather we might have to endure . . .
>
> I am not asking this question from a position of feeling that I am personally able to do it . . . but from a position of hesitancy and nervousness and to ask tentatively of us "Is it at all possible?" Maybe this is not a group for that, I don't know . . . But, maybe if we are able to go deeper, we can also discover elements of hate, fear, need for control . . . all the rest of it in us in various degrees and manifestations.

Gandhi's ability to draw a distinction between the person and the action is a significant reminder that it is possible to "speak truth in gentle language".

Gandhi writes:

> *A satyagrahi must never forget the distinction between evil and the evildoer . . . He may not even employ needlessly offensive language . . . A satyagrahi will always try to overcome evil by good, anger by love, untruth by truth, himsa by ahimsa. There is no other way. . .*[2]

Ramgopal continues:

> I have seen this rare trait of holding affection for the enemy (in the absence of a better word for now) in Gandhiji in the affectionate and friendly but very firm and relentless letter

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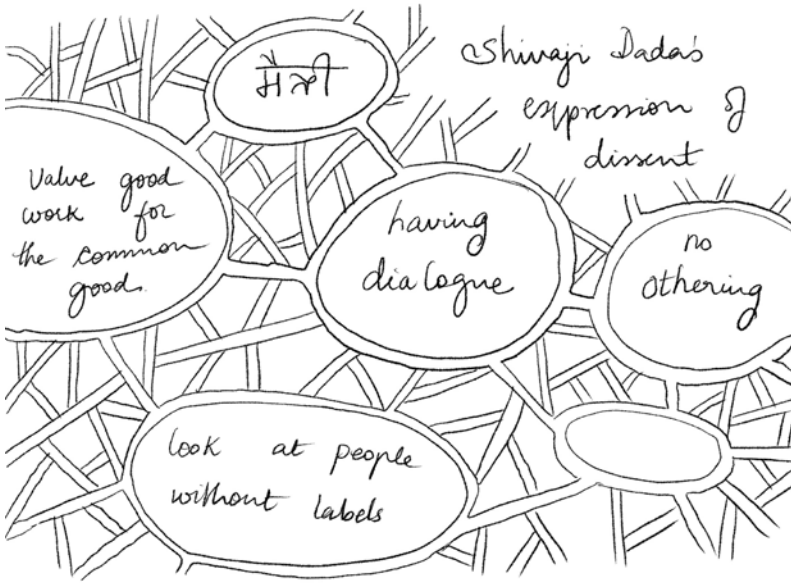
2 Quoted in *"Selections from Gandhi",* by Nirmal Kumar Bose, 1948: 150, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, p. 150.

that he writes and has delivered to the Viceroy intimating him of the Salt March . . . and many, many such instances . . . not at all mincing his words in expressing his radical views but without a shred of hate or scorn for the people. It was, perhaps, possible because he was relentless and rigorous in holding the critical lens to himself so much that he was able to see the other as just the same as himself.

At the Belgaum meeting in 2016 Shivaji was asked how he engaged with local RSS members. His response was to describe how he dialogued with them in the Gandhian spirit of accepting them as people even though he might profoundly disagree with their ideological position or actions on the ground.



Shivajidada's expression of dissent as noted by Swetha

From within the Network there has been a growing awareness of the danger of cultivating a position of 'alternative' versus mainstream. There is a need to be much more conscious of the language we use and where that is coming from when discussions slip into categorizing people as 'us' and 'them'. Importantly, there has also been an acknowledgement of the urgent need to critique what is unjust, harmful and corrosive for children and for the larger society.

The term 'alternative'

> There are alternative schools that are not alternative but govt. schools that are.
>
> **Swetha**

There has been some confusion both in terms of the Network which has at times been called 'The Alternative School Network' and the way a number of the schools connected to the Network have been referred to as 'alternative schools'.

> Today everyone is involved in Alternative Education, so everyone says, and so I am even more confused.
>
> **Ramdas, 1995**

In what way can we claim to be alternative? Is being 'alternative' a legitimate way of expressing what we are doing or trying to do? The term alternative' has been problematic because it might suggest to some a kind of right to be above scrutiny and reluctance to be accountable. Ramdas in his talk to JNU points out that:

> If you look at our reports, only the first one refers to our educational initiatives as alternative. From then on, we have referred to ourselves simply as Education Network. We have discussed this at length and felt that we are not attempting to be different for the sake of being different or alternative for the sake of being alternative; rather whatever we are attempting to do is education (as we understand it) in the real sense of the term.

A discussion in Puvidham[3] (referred to in Chapter Three) led us to wonder if the alternative schools were merely stuck in the backwaters and not in the flow of the mainstream! The Education Network is a miniscule minority and the few 'alternative schools' certainly have no monopoly on meaningful education.

Undoubtedly, regulations about all aspects of schooling can be a serious constraint to any kind of innovative practices. In addition, there is a sincere concern not only about pedagogical practices in the abstract but about the lives and well-being of children.

While there is clearly a necessity for some regulation on the part of the Government and transparency on the part of all schools, there has to be some space – as one person described the work of many in the Network – in "responding to the big questions of emancipation, transformation, self-realisation".

One of the shared concerns within the Network is not just about access to schooling but what happens to children in school and after they leave. Devanoora Mahadeva, the renowned Kannada writer, recently wrote in his book, *"RSS: The Long and Short of It"* about the real risk of further disempowering the marginalized by making them submissive and passive 'foot soldiers' to the dominant group by providing a very inadequate education.

Many of the Network are working out of a concern that children should not experience school as disempowering or humiliating but as a way of empowerment to think independently in an informed way. In this connection Gurveen quoted the words of Robert Maynard Hutchins:

> *Education is not to teach men facts, theories or laws, not to reform or amuse them or make them expert technicians. It is to unsettle their minds, widen their horizons, inflame their intellect, teach them to think straight, if possible, but to think nevertheless.*

---

3 Puvidham is an innovative school in Dharmapuri District. The Network Meeting was held there in 2006.

The need for a critical stance

Dissent does not come lightly and there is always the challenge that our claim to being alternative is exaggerated and overstated. Valli posed the questions:

> How radical are we in our own situations? Have we been radical enough? Will something else make us more radical?

Diba asked herself the question . . .

Tanu

Being innovative in an effort to find solutions can, on occasion, require being subversive or counter-cultural because part of the problem is to challenge a system that seeks to impose a dominant model that gives little freedom to think or act otherwise. Ramdas comments how the dominant ethos of schooling is deeply problematic. He writes, for example, that the examination-centric nature of present day schooling:

> . . . (It) promotes competition, aggression and distrust. From the day the child enters school, the child is taught not to cooperate, not to help, not to support others, but to work its way to the top of the heap any-which-way. We talk of our communities getting dismembered, but that is exactly what our schools are teaching generation after generation – that communities are not good for you, it is the individual, and only

> the individual that must be sustained. The philosophical basis on which we work is radically different and the question that we need to ask ourselves is whether we want to shift from this.

In the Report of the First Meeting of the Network way back in 1993 we read:

> Today we are too small and insignificant in terms of power and so are left neglected. But there may come a time when the state may try to enforce its own system on us. At present we are forced to follow the line of least resistance and accommodate ourselves to the system with minimum extent of compromising, but one day it may become necessary to stand up for our principles and rights as parents, teachers and as citizens. United in a network we may be able to work out strategies and positions.[4]

Indira also wrote along the same lines in 1998 as changes were on the horizon:

> Of late, with the talk of passing bills making education mandatory for all, I have begun to feel we, as a group, along with others in the field should lift our heads out of the sand and make our presence felt. If legislation about type, quality and quantity (number of years, number of subjects, etc. . .) is enforced, should we not stand up and be counted and make sure that liberal forces flourish? If we are genuinely for diversity in the teaching-learning process, should we not ensure that such diversity be not done away with by legal fiat?[5]

The challenge of the RTE

Sixteen years after 1993 the Network was faced with a challenge in the form of The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act. In some ways the RTE Act of 2009 confronted us, as a group, with our own contradictions, aspirations and illusions. After an initial, failed

4 Report of the Meeting on Alternative Education 1993, p.16.

5 Included in the newsletter from Rama and Ramdas March 1998.

attempt to secure a different kind of recognition that would give space for experimentation and a more contextualized education related to a particular community's history and needs, each person in the Network responded in the way they thought best to find a way that they could continue to work within or outside an institutional setting. In the period between 2010 and 2016 four of the schools connected with the Network decided to close. RTE was not the only reason for these closures, but it certainly was a factor. The constraints of meeting certain requirements in infrastructure, and the tendency towards centralization of the curriculum, text books and mode of assessment were felt to be problematic.

A number of the schools had earlier sought official recognition from their inception and others decided to comply with state regulations and endeavour to work constructively within the mainstream system. The process of getting legal recognition and complying with regulations over curriculum content, examination schedules has frequently been tedious and frustrating but it was felt necessary in order to continue.

Since the declaration of the RTE Act, two Network related learning centres[6] have started. They did not seek government recognition, but both had considerable parental support and commitment.

Mainstreaming the Alternative

Meanwhile, some groups have sought official ways to interact constructively with local government schools and educational institutions. One such example is Thulir, which started out as a collaboration with nearby government schools.

This is a summary drawn from Anu's description of events: Thulir began as a learning cum resource centre where children from government schools in the valley could come in the evenings and holidays to access books and materials.

Bowing to community pressure, Thulir became a primary school in

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6 Shibumi (2008) in Bengaluru and A Little Grove (2015) in Secunderabad

Celebrating World Rivers Day on the banks of the River Malaprabha at Habbanahatti, near Belagavi, 2024. Photo: Nyla Coelho

Children of Tarabanahalli Govt. Primary School sharing their collage of how the pumpkin grows. Photo: Roshan Sahi

2015, and some of the earlier activities were temporarily stopped until 2020. But during most of 2020 and 2021 (the pandemic and lockdowns), Thulir teachers conducted decentralized classes not only for their own children but for children from government schools, and from other private schools as well.

Thulir - art session as part of the outreach programme at Nammangadu Govt. School

Anu S. writes,

> After the pandemic Thulir conducted fortnightly training workshops for the government appointed village volunteer teachers under the Illam Thedi Kalvi (Education at your Doorstep Scheme).The Chief Educational Officer of Dharmapuri agreed to Thulir conducting workshops so that the volunteers would be better equipped to give the children in our villages their required educational support. The response, both from the volunteers themselves and the headmasters of the local government schools, was very positive.
>
> Interaction with local government schools continue and two teachers from Thulir visit two nearby schools on a regular basis to conduct sessions that include songs, stories, math and science activities. In addition, Suresh, one of the Thulir teachers, conducts evening classes for children in one of the nearby villages.

As Anu S. comments, “One cannot remain an island when one is in a community like this.”

Ramdas writes about recent developments in Vidyodaya School and Trust:

> We have been very conscious of the fact that education is a monopoly of the government – right from what should be taught to how it should be taught, to how the schools should look – anything and everything about education. This has been a great challenge for us and we have constantly laboured over how we could make the kind of changes that would impact the largest number of children.

Ramdas writes about their commitment to ensure that government tribal schools should be more effective. From the beginning they tried to work closely with district level authorities and directly with teachers to improve schooling for the children of tribal communities in the area.

Later Vidyodaya had "a wonderful collaboration with the SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) to run a residential elementary school for 100 drop-out children from adivasi community." The innovative work of the adivasi community designing curriculum and organizing schooling has been closely followed by researchers at Azim Premji University and they have provided a significant document "to show how building culture and identity into the teaching and learning programme enhances the dignity and therefore the commitment of teachers and students to better themselves."

In 2022 - 2023 in collaboration with Transformative Education for Sustainable Futures based in Delhi, Vidyodaya has conducted an intensive study with representatives from four tribal groups to come up with a policy document which they intend to use for discussions with state government officials.[7]

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7 For a fuller account of this work see *Contemporary Educational Dialogue*, Volume 21, Issue 1, January 2024. "Looking Inward, Looking Forward: Articulating Alternatives to the Current Education System for Adivasis, by Adivasis"
Chinmayi Jayakumar https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4297-4801 chinmayi.jk@gmail.com, Suganya Sankaran, and P. Gangadharan.
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Another example is the Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS) in Phaltan. The PSS began in 1978 as a non-formal centre for enrolling marginalised children in government schools and providing additional support for helping them to succeed there. Later after the establishment of Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan (KNB), a full-time school for children of diverse backgrounds, the PSS started an outreach programme to improve reading and writing in lower primary schools. To support this programme they developed a primer Apan vachu ya ("Let's Read") and a film explaining the theory and practice of the pedagogy.

Library volunteer from PSS, Phaltan reaching out to children from migrant sugarcane cutting families

In 2009 they formalized the outreach programme by starting the Centre for Language, Literacy and Communication (CLLC). At that time they added a component of English teaching for standards five to seven in the entire Phaltan block. The English workshops were scripted by Jane Sahi's *Everyday English*, and a film *"Here is a Tree",* which was supported and directed by Jane.

During this period they also developed a curriculum for early childhood educators from rural India under the expert guidance of Dr. Neelima Gokhale.

In 2015 PSS received a grant from USAID, Tata Trusts and CMF (Centre for Microfinance) to expand the Early Literacy Programme to

150 schools for four years, to build the capacities of 350 teachers. In 2021, as the COVID pandemic was receding, PSS was invited to intervene in Ausa block of Latur District in Marathwada to help primary teachers as well as anganwadis. Though the Child Development Project officer asked PSS to take up all 364 anganwadis in the block, PSS decided to work with 180 anganwadis and 25 schools.

MSCERT (Maharashtra State Council of Educational Research and Training) recently invited PSS to join the team developing the State Curriculum Framework for Foundational Literacy and Numeracy. Dr. Manjiri Nimbkar attended these workshops on behalf of PSS and contributed to the discussion of language education at the foundational stage. She was also invited to write several modules on emergent literacy and early literacy for building capacities of anganwadi workers and supervisors.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~

A different kind of approach has come from a group made up partly of those associated with the Tamil Nadu Network along with others in working towards strengthening civic responsibility. The collaboration with The Barefoot Academy of Governance involved conducting Workshops on 'Teachers For Change – Bringing Home the Constitution'. The Barefoot Academy conducted a yearlong programme for teachers from Marudam, Thulir, Payir, Vanavil and a few government school teachers. This programme took the dreams and beliefs laid out in the Constitution and helped teachers critically understand the society with all its inequalities of caste, class, gender and vocations and develop skills to transform their classrooms into inclusive, dialogic, and democratic spaces for learning. Over the course of four experiential workshops, exercises, activities and games were used to collectively understand and reflect upon the notions of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Justice.

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Many in the Network have found ways to contribute beyond the schools that they work in whether in generating resources, involving themselves formally or informally in teacher training or adult

education, working in local government schools, or engaging in research projects that help build up a data base to inform policy and curriculum frameworks. Some have been committed to writing articles and editing magazines to widen an interest and deepen awareness in issues related to education. *Edu-Care* is an example of an occasional magazine that has been published at least once a year since 1998.[8] Others have found creative ways to be involved in learning spaces outside the school such as in libraries or environmental and agricultural projects.

Shivaji's active engagement with the community

Shivaji has been very involved in protests and has been on marches with women demanding justice. On one occasion he shared about the resilience of women even in the face of death when one of the protesters accidentally was killed on the road during a march. Still others have worked with young adults to foster ways of enquiry

8 *Edu-Care* is described as "a platform for thoughts that otherwise stay unvoiced, unexplored, or relegated to the margins. We are constantly learning, consciously and unconsciously, from our personal and professional experiences, our interactions, and from the things we read, see and feel. *Edu-Care* is a space where we attempt to bring together these threads of our existence and relate them in specific and not-so-specific ways to education."

by providing fellowships and mentoring young people to explore the questions they have about society, themselves and a changing world; and also by collaborating with organizations such as The Barefoot Academy and being actively associated with open courses that look more deeply at how socio-economic realities impact education.

In Sevagram Sushama introduced B.El.Ed. Students from Gargi College, New Delhi to Nai Talim through practical activities such as gardening.

Padma Sarangapani, who is committed to developing teacher training and working towards systemic change argues that working within the system does not necessarily mean conformity or compromise but provides a way to ensure that positive policies are realized and implemented on the ground. In an interview she compared it to the commitment to make the Constitution a reality.

> Everybody knows that policies once if formulated don't just automatically play out, right? You have to continue to pitch. You think even in the Constitution of India . . . fantastic . . . but just because it is there that doesn't mean it will apply

> automatically. Every day we will have to stand for the values it enshrines. I think that is just the nature of the beast. Where there are political differences, we have to continue to advocate the position that we believe in and continue to do the work.

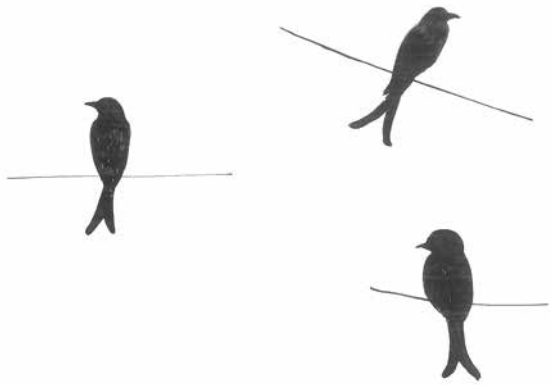
At the heart of all these efforts to bring about change formally or non-formally is a commitment to support meaningful education that is inclusive and equitable. The question of when, how to "speak up" (in Faiz's words in the poem *Bol ki Lab Azad hain Tere)* and to whom has met with very different responses from within the group but there is an element of acceptance that each one is in a process of discovering what is most authentic and possible for them — whether in activism, writing poetry, projects of afforestation, doing research or teaching.

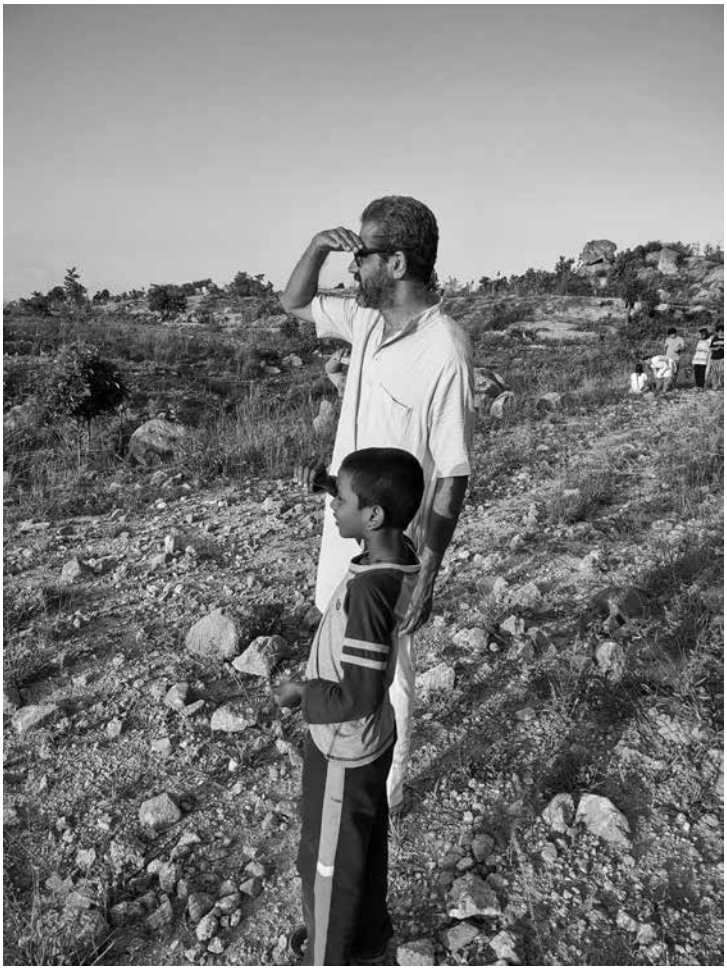
Shirly wrote a note to the Network group in 2020 because she was unable to attend the meeting. She writes about "quiet processes" that are significant in ways that are not usually visible or celebrated:

> *A definition of what we are and what we stand (or sit?) for would be impossible. Yet we know what we are not, don't we? And that's why we matter. That's why the Panchayat elections in Sittilingi matters. The turtle walk matters. Our night schools and farm schools and regular schools and irregular spaces matter.*
>
> *We are all scared. In varying degrees, of course.*
> *And, I think, it's a good sign.*
> *Now we can look our fears in the eye.*
>
> *As an individual, I too am quite confused. No, almost lost. Like many I know, I too am holding on to the few flimsy threads of sanity – daily chores, caring for the very old and very young, walking the daily walks and translating all the small print news into headlines.*
>
> *It's so reassuring to see so many of us out there plodding on with the tasks of daily life, with the challenges of being a part of a school/community/ neighbourhood . . .*

It makes sense. It makes collective sense. The logic of the rivers that begin their lives as very small springs in far flung lands.

I feel I too belong in this flow.





Krishna and Arline at Shibumi

9

Changes and Continuities in the Network

Fortunately, we are vulnerable to change . . .

Shirly quoted by Yasmin

These connectings, the work in many places, involving several people, have been underway for a while . . . so what lies ahead will stem from the growth and understanding that has happened over some time. There is a sense of hope and of possibilities . . . and of having to engage with what stirs me . . .

Diba

Never doubt that a small group of people through reflection and thought can bring about change.

Margaret Mead

Vasant: Today we are in turmoil, because we are not sure. We are in two, three, four minds.
Started with ideals, Find world is changing,
We are in a fix, what is the right thing to do?
What do we hold on to?

Valli: What has held us together?
Turmoil not new. One question I ask, Is there a crisis of confidence in me?

The lack of explicit structure has given the Network a certain fragility but also its strength. Underlying the loose framework there is a sense of direction and an understanding about what the Network is about. Certain ways of doing things were quite soon established and yet

there was also room for change and surprise. Krunal writes, ”Each Network meeting offers a different experience. How a meeting unfolds depends on the members present for their meeting, where they are in their journeys, their needs, challenges and what they are bringing with them to the meeting.“ The particular people present, the time, place and wider context give each meeting a sense of beginning afresh. The coming together of intentionality and openness have over the years helped foster a creative exchange.

The Network has matured over time and there is a sense that, rather like the rhythm of the seasons, there are naturally going to be times of fruitfulness, aridness and saturation but also times of new life and energy. In the discussion about change we also begin to recognize what is precious and worth holding on to and begin to marvel that for some people at certain times “our hearts were touched and became one”.

A sense of the provisional

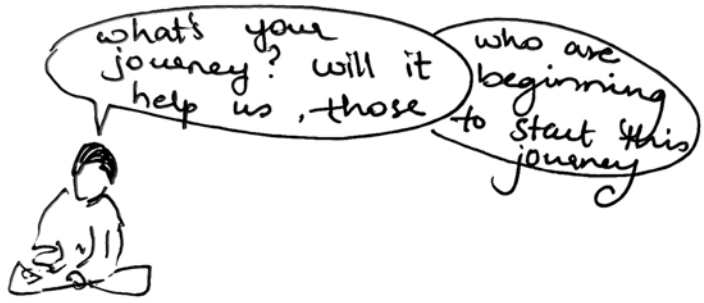
For some, there has been almost from the beginning of the Network a sense of the provisional. Vasant’s note way back in 1997 has a section entitled, “Will our Network Survive? Should it?” He writes with a mixture of detachment and commitment. What he wrote then still seems relevant:

> Even while I am detached about the existence of our particular Network, I am convinced that we need communities like ours and, further, to link themselves up to start creating a new social order. Therefore, a good thing that has come into being should not be allowed to die out; in fact, we should be concerned to make it grow in strength.

Holding on and letting go are both ingredients of growth and decay. The present is always moving: it is a process of both shedding and absorbing the past but already looking towards new possibilities.

Some things continue . . .

For many the impetus that began the Network has sustained and



continues to sustain people both at a personal level and in their work. Below are some comments that capture the trust in the way the Network has retained its initial vision.

- I don't feel that the Network has changed. Just the fact that we are all reflecting on these matters shows that the attempt is to go deeper into issues rather than touch their periphery.

- I don't think I want to see anything changed as such. It is a very cohesive group without anyone having to go around doing any PR work. People feel for each other and that makes everyone want to meet and spend time with each other. This is a very genuine feeling and I do hope nothing of this changes.

- No one can ever take the songs we have sung away from us . . . because we can carry them in our hearts. Many of them are repeated year after year and they still don't lose their significance or charm. These songs . . . we will always sing . . .

- Though the tenor of meetings has varied from time to time, quiet dialogic sharing has continued as the common mode.

- The warmth and the sparkle in people's eyes have remained the same.

- The depth of sharing that often happens between sessions, the excitement of meeting each other again, the expectation of being surprised by new members' experiences, the glow after the meeting . . .

- The friendships and connections that sprang out of the Network will endure as will the good intentions and respect.

Harish sums up his thoughts on what for him has been enduring:

> From my experience over these years, I have seen the Network group as a very secure space. By and large, the relationships in the space have been forged over years of sharing, caring and trust and the foundation on this front has been strong. And hence the group has also been able to accommodate new people and ideas and carry on reflective discussions in a secure manner. This aspect has always been a part of my experience over the years and I see this unchanged. This is a core quality of the group itself and many people have contributed regularly towards this end.

Impact of the Network on the workplace

Some have reflected on how interactions in the Network have deepened their understanding of their work and purpose and opened up new possibilities. Anu S. traces her growing sense of involvement with the Network. She wrote in an open letter to the Network in 2011 how she shifted from being on the periphery of the group to feeling a part of a community of learners.[1]

> It needs old people as well as new people to negotiate the system and to negotiate with the society that we would like. I have embedded myself in this path without knowing anything; now I am walking as someone who was a stranger but now feels like an insider.

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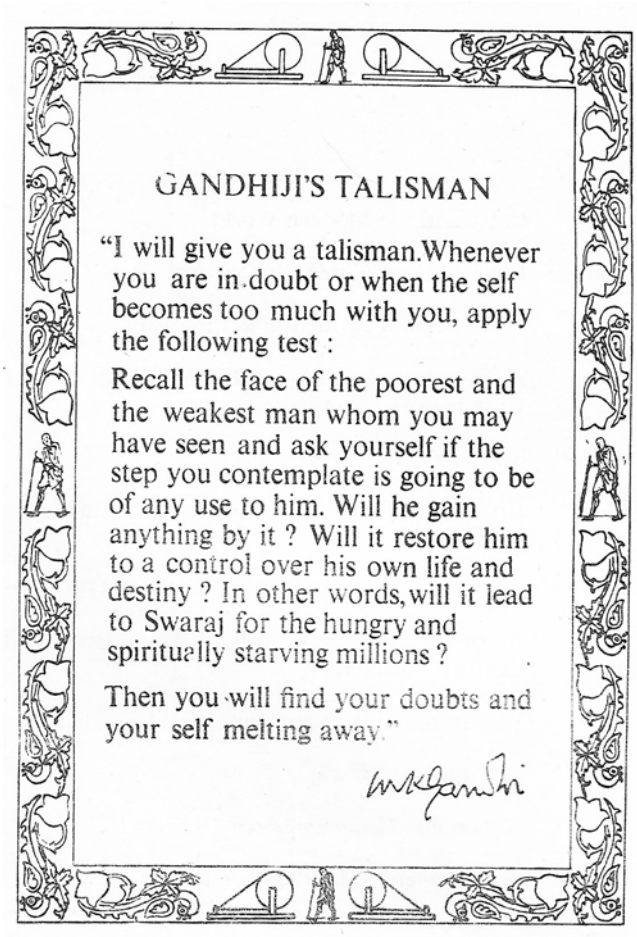
1 See Network Meeting 19

Gurveen, for example, writes about how the exchanges in the Network have played a significant role in the development of her work at the Centre for Learning in Hyderabad and beyond.

> Many issues/questions raised were very thought-provoking and I continued thinking about them long after the meeting. These questions expanded my way of thinking . . . about the linkages between education and social-economic-political spheres, about history, about identity and caste, about the need and what it might mean to be rooted in one's culture, about discussion about who might be "the last man" mentioned in Gandhi's 'The Talisman'.



GANDHIJI'S TALISMAN

"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test :

Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it ? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny ? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions ?

Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away."

M K Gandhi

A number of people commented how the Network provided a valuable learning space that informed their theory and practice. Yashodara comments:

> This 'education' of exposure to issues and learning from others' experiences and work, that I have received from the Network is real, considerable and definitely far more valuable, I now realize, than many academic courses that I could've done in the area of education. What a gift!

Krunal also writes of the Network meetings as a learning space, "For me Network meetings are opportunities to see and understand the world from diverse perspectives. Meetings have helped me challenge my beliefs, assumptions and practices."

For some the meetings confirmed and validated insights that had been gained working on the ground. Shivaji recalls the meeting at Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan (KNB) in Phaltan, Satara District when there was a visit to ARTI (Appropriate Rural Technology Institute). He writes, "I came to realize the necessity of acquiring life skills alongside formal education. . . We observed the various products they created, such as smokeless chulhas, drums required for the gobar gas plant, compost for organic farming, biomass covers, and more." Commenting on the discussion that followed, Shivaji says, "After listening to all of this, Vasantanna remarked that true learning occurs when people engage the intellect while working with their hands to create something. I wholeheartedly agree with this sentiment. Civil engineers may draft a design for house construction, but they truly comprehend the finer details of the work when they discuss it with their mason colleagues. I have observed that when the mason understands the design, they often have a more in-depth grasp of the work compared to the civil engineer."[2]

There have inevitably been changes on a personal level with openings and closures in the work place; individually and in the Network as a community there have been new insights gained and

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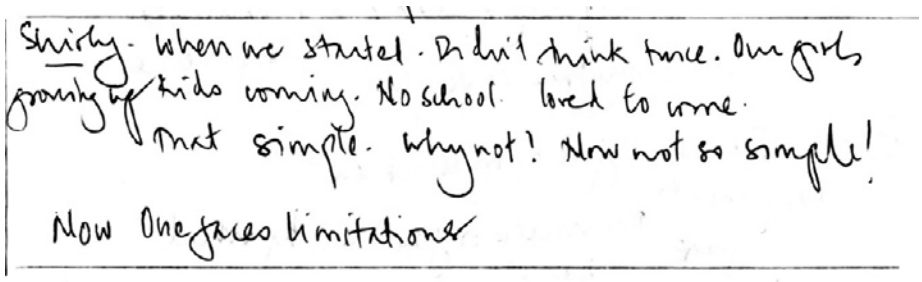
2 This extract is taken from an interview with Shivaji by Amita Naigaonkar in 2023 and translated from the Marathi.

levels of naivety exposed. In the last thirty odd years there have also been seismic shifts politically, economically, culturally and ecologically that have impacted our lives and often forced change.There have been changes that are positive but also negative. Many have experienced a changing landscape around them where aggressive 'development' threatens to rupture relationships with nature and communities.

Up to the 1990s many of us enjoyed freedom in creating alternative schools, with little intervention from the Government. Subsequently this freedom largely evaporated in the face of a more proactive, albeit ambivalent, authority that sought to monitor and expand educational opportunities for all.
Shirly commented on the changing context of a family's choice of school:



Turning points can be of different kinds and over the span of the Network's life some significant happenings have impacted the Network and sometimes added fresh dimensions and expanded or challenged the group to become more searching. These changes have happened internally within the workings of the Network itself but have also influenced ways of engagement in the workspace .

There have been particular moments which have had a lasting impact such as when in 1995 Yasmin read the extract on dialogue from David Bohm which was to guide the way of conducting meetings thereafter or the decisive decision made at the Sevagram meeting in 2010, to have discussions in languages other than English. This led to the starting of regional groups and has meant including wider and more diverse groups.

Ramdas writes,

> Two very significant themes have had a way of taking a relook at things in our workspaces. One I felt was the theme on History and the other on Spirituality. Both these have been taken for granted and our discussions over two years, in the case of History, and the deep discussion on Spirituality, I feel, made us relook at the way we thought of these in our classrooms. I am afraid I cannot speak for everyone, but the fact that we took time for History in particular meant that it had some significance in our schools.

There were also gradual but often significant shifts in viewpoint as the Network's concerns were shaped by changes in the larger society. Members have shared their passionate involvement in critical issues such as gender justice and the climate crisis which have alerted many to relook at what learning and teaching might mean at this present time.

Below are described some of the factors round the topic of "befriending the future" both within the Network and its outlook.

Changing needs and expectations . . .

Gurveen reminds us that we need to respond to changing needs, challenges and contexts. "There have been significant internal and external changes since we first started. These changes must be acknowledged, and their effect and implications understood."

Diba

Inevitably, over a period of thirty years many things change – the places we live, the work we do, the interests and passions we have, the people who we feel close to, our needs to live quieter lives or to find fresh stimulus. For some the alignment with the Network continues, although in different ways, and for others finding different kindred or alternative groups to be engaged in has been a creative way forward.

Gurveen points out how expectations have changed:

> When we started, our needs from the group were different, we were looking for support and fellowship but also for information, and for connection to others in the field – as access to books and information was not easy. Today, even the youngest person coming in is much more informed about issues and everyone knows others who are working in education, environment, human rights, equity . . .

Participation in the Network has changed for some as they retire from such an active involvement in day to day work and responsibilities. Maxine remarks:

> The Education Network is like an extended family – perhaps particularly like an Indian extended family. It is growing, and those of us who have been members for years are conscious that we are growing old. Some of us no longer are working in our schools. We look to the Network for sustaining ties.

For Harish there was a certain disappointment that the interaction is not as vibrant as it used to be:

> In the past few years, there has been a certain dilution in the intensity of the discussions themselves. My memories of the first two meetings have been of having discussions with a certain spark and passion in them. I enjoyed this aspect. I think Vasant Anna had a big role on this front. But over the past two or three years, I did feel a certain void in the discussions. I felt that there is a certain tempering of the spark and passion of seeing an issue from different viewpoints.

Leaving the Network

Over the years there have been not only 'comings' but also 'goings'. For some this was entirely personal or pragmatic related to ageing, ill-health, changing family situation or shifting location, but for others the ethos of the Network itself was problematic.

People have left because there was too much talking and others because the talking was of the wrong kind! A number have felt more aligned to other groups that are more directly engaged in activism or more rigorously committed to intellectual inquiry. Inevitably, as in any group, some have experienced a dissonance in terms of ways of being together or understanding the very purpose of meeting. This feeling of alienation has led to people sometimes distancing themselves from the Network; and for those who continue to feel connected to the group there has often not been the energy, space or readiness to reflect on how the Network could be more authentically inclusive or at least more modest in its claims to openness and honesty.

Responses to individuals' absences or departures have been mixed. In the early years there was a deliberate shared practice of writing letters to people who had not been at the meeting as a way of reaching out to those who, for one reason or another, could not attend a meeting. Even now the sharing of reports helps to keep the group together over distance and time. However, as the numbers grew this effort to stay in touch outside the space and time of the meetings waned and was left to individuals to keep in contact. There was no system in place to ensure that people felt included – though Rama and Ramdas, more than anyone else, were actively concerned to follow up people's silences and absences.

Earlier in the days of 'snail mail,' at the end of a meeting we would jointly write to those who were absent. Perhaps this is a practice that should be continued. Chitra Balakrishnan wrote in 1998 in response to such a letter:

> Thanks very much for the Network letter just received and for all the information. At times I wonder whether I'm really rather selfish. I seem to get much more than anything I have to

> offer at these meetings. Anyway . . . Thank you very much for keeping me part of the Network – which is very precious.

Others have commented how, even though they were only able to attend meetings intermittently, they felt welcomed and unjudged when they did return. There have been those, like Raghubabu and others, who shared their personal reasons for leaving and their decisions were respected though regretted. In June 1999 Ramdas shared a letter that Raghubabu had sent shortly before his decision to leave the school where he was working.

> I am leaving Anantapur – maybe on the 28th May '99 – forever. Next six months I will be in meditation near Hyderabad. After that I may settle in any cooler regions (maybe in Himalayas or at Ooty or at Kodai) and continue meditation.
>
> Thanks for the encouragement and co-operation given by all of you to my experiments.
>
> My best wishes are always with all of you. I always meditate for the strengthening of our Network, and influencing the govt. approaches and policies for better standards in education . . .

It was in this connection that Ramdas was reminded of the song 'Hotel California' sung by The Eagles:

> *You can check out any time you want, but you can never leave!*

Nevertheless, regrets have been expressed that people's absences or departures were often ignored and Indira writes:

> Friendships grew around the meetings and occasionally new people would come and that gave an opportunity to make more connections. But people also dropped out! It bothers me that we as a group don't wonder / worry about those who came only for a few meetings and then dropped out.

A few people, when asked, have been more explicit about how their experience of the Network had not met their expectations. For some

coming from a different milieu – whether the corporate world or formal academic institutions – the Network has been a welcoming but finally uncomfortable space. Amman Madan, coming from APU, who attended just one meeting, said:

> It was a world which was connected but obviously very different. And people talk differently. Their high points were different, their low points were different. Their rhythm was different. So I felt very like a fish out of water. People were very friendly; it was not the absence of friendliness. It was just that I did not know what to say and all the time wondering if I will be too hostile or sound too foolish. That was one point of awkwardness. And, the second was also connected. At points I felt that I was thinking in a very different direction from what people were saying and if I were to say that, it would come out as a very rude and hostile kind of way of talking. Not at all a nice way of talking. So I kind of kept quiet. It was very nice to get to be in touch with such people. But I did not know what to say, what to do.

For some there was a dissatisfaction that meetings do not focus enough on certain themes or topics; and that discussions are not grounded in well-considered argument or fail to be productive. There has been a criticism that discussions tend to stay on the surface and do not address or grapple with the underlying systemic problems that increasingly impact our lives – whether it is about the nature of ownership or trusteeship, the power dynamics of politics, the dangers of surveillance or the erosion of human rights.

One person was disturbed that the meaning of 'alternative' itself has never been adequately probed. One critical aspect of being 'alternative' is to challenge the basis of violent structures that determine people's choices or lack of them or threaten the earth's resources and so increasingly make the world uninhabitable for all living beings. 'Being alternative' in this sense is relevant and vital to all kinds of schools whether private or government, whether for the privileged or the dis-privileged.

Others have felt uneasy at the non-ideological orientation of the group as a whole and dropped out. At least one person left the

Network with a sense of disappointment and frustration that the group was not earnest enough or willing to take the discussion to a deeper level spiritually or politically. He commented that if there is a reluctance to engage with some of the fundamental questions about the human condition and our understanding of life and death, suffering and healing then discussions about education can become limited and superficial. Without a framework of 'rightful conduct', he argued, we are all unconsciously a prey to inward drives that seek fame, self- aggrandizement and these themselves block meaningful exchange.

For some there has been a feeling of growing distance over time and one person candidly expressed a sense of disconnect:

> The years rolled by and I stopped attending every meeting – but felt energized whenever I made time to attend one . . . I speak in the past tense, for I no longer feel that same joy at the Network meetings . . . Somewhere I also experienced the tedium of discussing the same themes over as younger people started being part of the Network. The tedium is vastly multiplied by the endless and random exchanges over social media. At times the dialogue becomes strident and one-sided, I feel, and I want to disconnect . . . Yes, I am getting old and that is part of it. I no longer want/need to belong . . . I think it is time to say goodbye to the Network for me.

In contrast, some have expressed that it is the flexibility and openness to diverse approaches that has been the strength of the Network and that it is the absence of a single ideology that has enabled the Network to continue. There remains a tension – hopefully a creative tension – between having a clarity about a framework to build on and being bound by a structure that is closed to change, doubt and question. However, there is a problem if the discussions do not seriously engage with difference and, for the sake of a false notion of 'peace', remain intellectually lazy.

Some younger participants have expressed a sense of unease at the way meetings happen and have felt inhibited to be fully themselves. It is clear that there is a need to clarify what needs to be preserved but

not fossilized in the Network.[3]

Most people have felt that the onus was on each participant to feel a sense of commitment to the group and that keeping in touch was a mutual responsibility. Similarly, the deepening of the discussion and staying focused is finally a joint responsibility. Inevitably, the flexibility of the Network has its strengths and weaknesses.

Responding to a changing context

Others welcome the stimulus of a changing context. Arun put it like this, “Times are always changing and we should be ready to flow with the needs of the changing times.”

New people have joined, bringing fresh perspectives, experience and insights. Some are young and others experienced in fields other than education but who see education and concern for children within a much broader frame. A number of people have brought different issues to the forefront – most particularly passionate concerns about the environment and an acknowledgement of the spectrum of gender. Their commitments have sensitized the group to these urgent debates and calls for action.

Response to political agenda and impact on educational policies and the socio-cultural fabric

In the present political climate spaces for freedom of speech are shrinking, and there is the growing realization that being a critic of the dominant mainstream or a majoritarian viewpoint can be seen as subversive and threatening to those in positions of power and authority.

The announcement of the Right to Education Act which affected alternate education programs all over the country, provoked a heated discussion within the Network itself as some saw the closure of unregistered schools as “collateral damage” in the greater interest of systems that would serve all children. For others, it has raised

3 Cf. ‘Rethinking Inclusion’ See p. 157.

questions about when dissent is valid. As curricula and text books in the school and content of teacher training in the colleges are subject to change in line with political interests it becomes increasingly a challenge to express or explore alternatives.

Growing concerns about the disturbing and blatant communalism from the 1990s following the destruction of the Babri Masjid, have been deeply troubling and a number of themes for meetings have centred around the teaching of history and the practice of inclusion in schools.

Social injustice, the vulnerability of the marginalized and the many unacknowledged faces of privilege have also been critical topics for discussion. A greater awareness of the gender spectrum has been an issue that has been often discussed both in regional meetings and at the National Network.

Concern about the environment

Mural at Thulir

Krishna remarks on how the multiple crises remind us of our responsibility as educators to sensitize and build awareness with the students we work with. In relation to the problems of environmental degradation, Deborah comments about 'the inescapable knowledge of the fragility of the planet and the uncertainty of the future has made many of us much more diffident and troubled,' and quotes the words

of a leading environmentalist and educator, Derek Hodson.

> *"Now, for the first time in history, we are educating students for life in a world about which we know very little, except that it will be characterized by substantial and rapid change, and is likely to be more complex and uncertain than today's world. For some, this is an exciting prospect; for others, it is profoundly disconcerting, even frightening."* [4]

Intentional change from within the Network

Discussion at Murudam 2024

Some significant things have changed and have effectively strengthened the Network. We have welcomed people who are involved in other fields such as organic agriculture, environmental awareness and mental health. The interconnectedness of all these dimensions becomes increasingly visible and tangible.

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4 Quoted in an article by Deborah Dutta "Teaching for a resilient tomorrow". See https://www.teacherplus.org/teaching-for-a-resilient-tomorrow/ April 2016, Focus

The commitment to start regional groups starting in Tamil Nadu has proved a very positive move. Anu S. observes, “These have made our dialogues more meaningful, specific to local issues and more inclusive due to language. Regional networks have also enabled our institutions to have more regular exchanges, visits and sharing of resources.“

There has been a growing awareness that the Network group needs to be more diverse in terms of caste, education and language.

Swetha’s drawing of a conversation between Arun and Ramdas

Towards making the Network a more participatory, inclusive and democratic space

Amit writes that there is an urgent need to be more aware of what the Network is about if it is to thrive:

> Not much has changed in the last ten years since I have been with the Network. However, sometimes I also get the feeling that it might slowly disperse unless we put in effort to keep it alive.

The following comments have been put forward by different members as 'things to think about' in order to strengthen the Network.

Preparation for the Meeting

- I do feel that there isn't enough preparation by members before coming to the meetings. We don't delve sufficiently into the themes. This is something that used to be done before. Papers were circulated and each of us reflected on the theme based on the experience of our schools. This was very rewarding as a lot of nuances came out and we could all take something back to our schools.

- We need to get back to circulating papers about themes before the meetings. Preparation is essential. Otherwise, the discussions tend to go all over the place and everyone feels lost at the end of it all.

Sharing responsibility and decision making

- We each have both positive and critical comments to make about the Network, but we all care about the Network so we realize that we are also to blame / responsible for the problems . . .

- I feel a small group of three or four on a rotation basis should take responsibility of the Network. At each meeting members can volunteer and this group can initiate discussions about various aspects of the Network.

- We are all responsible for how we bring depth to the discussions.

- It would be good if a group could also stay back after the meeting for half a day at least to gather the threads and reflect on the meeting and consider what would be the ideas that can be taken forward.

- Clarity for the kind of report we want to share and taking of responsibility in turns are needed.

Rethinking inclusion

One of the concerns that has been expressed is how the Network must not just look back to the past but must explore and be open to new ways of doing things and respond to different expectations of younger people joining who do not necessarily want to just 'fit in'. Krishna expresses his worry about the need to be more open in a changing world:

> There is definitely a history as to how the Network was set up and nurtured. The process started three decades ago when the world was very different. Much has changed meanwhile in terms of technology, the way we meet and communicate, etc. The newer generation of members have grown up in a different world and in a different way. How do we relate and adapt ourselves as a group so that they can feel welcomed and at ease to share and participate?

Some recent participants have written how they did not prioritize the meetings because they did not feel at ease with the style of the meeting. Adwait writes," I become a version of myself that takes a few days to wear off after the Network meet. This version is polite, timid, able to say a few coherent agreeable thoughts, and is constantly trying to 'fit in'. When I am back, I fondly remember the moments but somehow cannot relate to many of them." He concludes with a pertinent question, "I wonder if there are other young people who feel the same as I do, and if so, what would be a way to overcome this situation?"

In a recent meeting discussing the future of the Network there had been a suggestion that for one session newer and younger members should meet separately and see how they might see and do things differently. Sadly, that did not happen but unless there is an openness to change and to ways of doing things differently then there is a risk of 'carrying on as usual' and limiting the scope of the Network and in the process excluding new and relevant voices.

- Now there's a wider age gap between the oldest and the youngest and we have many younger people – which is heartening. The wide age difference brings a richness, freshness but also its own challenges. Each person is at a different stage and point in their journey and their needs differ within the group.

- For many years, the average number at the Network meetings was around 25 but now we are almost double that number. It is a very positive development, but one that needs to be examined and understood in terms of the implications for these meetings going forward.

One suggestion has been to open out the discussion to others and that the Network should not be so exclusive:

> A teacher who works in isolation but who is working hard with the children and in the school or any other kind of work in our organisations should be given a chance to attend this meeting . . . If someone is working in a small area and gets any kind of exposure to meet people who have so much experience and doing different kinds of things at their own pace it will give him/her some confidence/belief about the work.

Functioning of the Network

A number of people have made suggestions about changes they would like to see in the functioning of the Network.

- Less polite, more direct.

- Less talk and more work.

- If people do feel that it helps to have a facilitator then it should be done . . . We need someone to step in to bring more voices into the conversation and check (politely, sensitively, but firmly) people who dominate/hog conversations.

- Would it help to have a sense of continuity if we actually highlighted any decisions that have been made in one meeting and to carry it through to the next so that there is not a sense of drifting and indecisiveness?

- The few times we have made an attempt to function as a forum to represent some common causes things just fizzle out – can't say why ! The moment a situation comes where we have to work within a structure/deadlines/framework – things don't take off . . .

- There have been dramatic changes in forms of communication in the last thirty years. A recent comment by Deborah discussed how that may have a positive impact by making communication more frequent and accessible. She writes, "Though the charm and energy of physical meetings are unparalleled, perhaps the digital space could be used to connect once in a few months around some theme or general sharing. I hope the Network continues to grow, building on conversations and ideas by the diverse group of people connected in their wish for just and creative forms of education. "

- Others have expressed the possibility of creating smaller interest groups meeting on specific topics online.

Reviewing the idea of reports

From 1999 there has been a debate about the value of writing reports and what form they should take. In Vasant's text , 'Thinking Loudly About Our Network' he discusses how to ensure the reports might be of interest to those within the Network and also beyond.

> Maybe it is quite boring to read the report after some months; it could be stale. Unless, of course, the issues and themes

> presented, the questions raised, comments made, different angles presented, experiences cited and so on, remain alive and help us both in our thinking rightly and our action, in the school and outside it.

Vasant continues in a way that is surprisingly pertinent at our present time when digitalized transcripts of the entire meeting are relatively easy to produce or unedited comments are placed without context which make reading and making meaning difficult.

> Our report, obviously, cannot reproduce every word said by everyone at the meeting. Thankfully so too!
>
> I suggest that our report should be written in such a way that a thoughtful, sensitive reader gets drawn into it as a participant reader. Individual narration, presentation, questions, doubts, reservations then become the core around which one can generalise, abstract, theorize – not conclusively, dogmatically, but tentatively, suggestively, creatively, imaginatively – if one may use the word.

Looking at some of the early reports that were so thoughtfully put together invite us to think again what is the purpose and form of a report that would be most meaningful. The very first Reports were compiled by using the notes made by different volunteers during the meeting. For each Report a small group was formed to take care of the editing. In time, this proved quite burdensome for a few and other possibilities were considered. Following the Thulir meeting in 2011 Valli wrote a stirring invitation to all –

> How and who will take the responsibility to capture the essence of this meeting for those who were not present or even to reinforce important considerations/ reflections/ content of dialogue . . . I am wondering. One thing we can all do is to jointly attempt to make a report through net communication. Everyone can write a brief note; we will continue to read and add before we immerse ourselves into other preoccupations. Acceptable — So, we start with the “NEXT”. . .
>
> Warm wishes, Valli

To which Padma responded: “Valli, you have just given net-work a whole new meaning!”

The report of the 19th Network Meeting was done in such a participatory way and people were asked to send “takeaways” and this provided a rich and varied content for the Report.

This process of involving many more people in documenting the meeting is, surely, something that we could do in the future!

Creating a wider Network

Looking at the future, some members envision strategies that would enable the Network to reach out to other groups and organizations.

- For me the dream is to have a large number of small networks across the country which could then influence change from below. How do we go about this? . . . Can we bring on board various alternative groups, not necessarily only in the field of education so that we have a broad base with which to challenge the powers-that-be?

- It would be wonderful if the Network can work on “KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS OF PEOPLE IN THEIR CULTURE”.

- I have sometimes wondered if the Network, with its rich experiences in school education, could work to be a pressure group on education policy reform to benefit more children.

Krunal writes that for him the future of the Network lies in building on what has emerged over the years as ‘the core elements’:

> Diversity of members and the safe space that helps members share their thoughts, reflections, and challenges without being judged and being vulnerable are the core elements of the Network meetings. And therefore, to me, the future Network should continue to ensure and nurture diversity in its members, perspectives and discussions.

In a recent small group discussion about change someone remarked on the limitations of only thinking about endless growth as a linear movement towards ever greater progress. The Network might be more meaningfully compared to certain plants where the tight-lipped bud, the fallen petal, the new leaf and the compact seed within the ripening fruit are all visible at the same time. Nothing is separate or complete in itself but always moving within a network of relationships.

Seed, bud, flower and fruit of the wild passion plant. Drawing by Jyoti Sahi

Remembering . . .

Janaki, Vasant, Venu, Subba, Christa, Tara, Shirly

> Each one is missed and each one has contributed in a unique way. The Preface of the Report of the First Network meeting started like this: "Journeys of the mind, when travelled at all, travel long. In the right company, they achieve intense depths, great heights." Who could have asked for better company, as we travel on?

Janaki Iyer (1930 – 2008)

Soon after Janaki passed away Ramdas wrote a letter to the Network which included the following:

> Janaki has been with the Network for over a decade. Her health, as we all know, has never been too good but it never stopped her from attending meetings even if the circumstances were trying. Her dedication to children everywhere, her utter devotion to the children of Ananda Bharathi was an inspiration to many of us. She never tired or retired from Ananda Bharathi – that is truly a measure of her devotion, not just for an institution but to give children who were denied opportunities a better deal. She was able to draw together a large number of people and inspire them to dedicate themselves to such work.

Anuradha P. shares her affectionate memories of her relationship with Janaki beginning with her very first meeting.

As Janakakka is for me . . .

> One day in the afternoon I was sitting outside. One girl from my *bhasthi,* holding some books in her hands, was going somewhere. I had been watching her since last two or three days going like this at the same time. I observed that she is going daily at the same time.

Janaki and Anuradha, 2004

So that day, I called her and asked her, “Where are you going daily at this time?” She told me that she is going to a school that runs in the afternoon for girls. I felt very happy when she said the school is for girls. Because by that time, I had started thinking about women and girls’ situation in the society by listening to the stories in my tailoring classes and for that reason I started to teach to women in my bhasthi as part of Vayojana Vidya program started by the Government.

So immediately I asked that girl, “Can I come with you to see the school? Can I also teach there?” That girl was unable to answer me, she said, “You can come to school and talk to Akka.” I told her to wait for me, and I just combed my hair and went along with her. The waiting that girl did, and the day I went to that school called Ananda Bharathi changed my life totally . . . I worked in that school for maybe more than 20 years . . .

I entered the school. All the children were sitting around along with the three teachers. More than 20 children were there. They did pranayama, then they did some singing. After that they divided into groups. I just sat in one corner in observing. After some time Janakakka came to me and asked, “What are you doing at present? Do you teach children?” I told her

about me and that I had completed my 10th class, but didn't pass in maths. I told her that at present I am taking tuitions in the evening, and I am learning tailoring. She said, "Tomorrow morning you come to my house. Then we can talk."

Next day I was very scared to go alone to Janakakka's house. I went very slowly and with a lot of fear in the mind. I rang the bell. With a very affectionate smile Akka came and opened the door. She asked me to sit, and she went into the other room. It was the first time I went alone to somebody's big house with sofa, and chairs and tables. I was unable to decide where to sit, should I sit on the chair, or should I sit on the floor? Like this I was thinking and Akka came and said "Ayyo, sit, why you are still standing?" She showed me a chair, we both sat in the chairs facing each other. That was the respect we had for each other, that time she was maybe about 65 and I was not even in my 20's. People may get respect with the name and fame or any other reason which may be related with the social hierarchy. But the respect which we both maintained was the respect that comes with true love, without selfishness. The respect we had was one human who recognised the humanity in another human. Because of that our relation continued and extended to respect each other's friends, family members and relatives as well, even today.

The first question she asked me was "Do you know drawing?" I said that I do small drawings, but I will learn what all you want me to do. She asked me, "Are you planning for higher studies?" I said I want to do my 10th class supplementary exam. I told her that my parents didn't have money to send me for higher studies, so after my 10th class also, I may not go to a college. I told her that, if possible, I am thinking to do Open University studies, I told her this is my plan, but I don't know what will happen. She said okay and asked me to prepare a chart on the importance of light *(velugu)*, with the drawings of things we use for light, which are symbols for the light. She asked me "What all can you draw for children to teach about light. I said lamp, sun, bulb, and fire, and one insect called *minuguru purugu* that will give light in the night time. She explained some more things, and gave me some

chart paper and crayons. At the end, she told me that she will pay me 300/-per month and asked," Is it okay for you?", I just said, "Okay, madam." She told me with a smile, "Don't call me madam, call me Akka", I also smiled at her and came back with lot of happiness.

Janakakka talked with one teacher who taught mathematics in the school about me and asked her to help me in maths to write my exam. That was the first time I took initiative to travel by bus alone for the tuition. I gave the re-exam and I passed. To give the exam Akka asked me to take one month break from the school and come back again after the exam. That was the initial months of my work in the school, I didn't have that much relation with school or with Akka. I thought she may call or may not call me back to the school. But two days before my exam one evening some children came to my house from the school, to give me a greeting card saying "All the best" for the exam and that they are all really waiting for me to come back to school soon. It was signed by all the children and all the adults in the school. The happiness and the confidence that I got that moment was given to me to dream for more and more exams for Higher Studies. This is the way Akka used to build relations with people to build their relations with the school. She had a unique way of building the relations between the people, connected with the school. That's why Ananda Bharathi was able to build a committee as well as a community.

Like this I can share thousands of experiences with Janakakka. But I chose these two because I felt this is the strength of my connection with Akka. My work in AB and my relation with her, was totally mingled with love, and respect. We cried together and laughed together. It doesn't mean that we didn't have any differences between us. Actually, we had a lot. She used to have lot of observations of people's/ teachers' behaviour in the school. She had a particular way of dealing with the things in the school, also a lot of attachment to the children. I too learned to see things in a particular way, observe people in a particular way. I also built the same attachment to the children. AB work created for me a lot of

platforms to explore my world, to understand the world, people and what not. . . along with this, my personal life also was teaching me a lot of things, to understand things in a different way. So sometimes, maybe sternly, I may think differently, and may not agree with her. We also started to argue, but it was always to see a common platform to come together and work together. Sometimes we may not come to that common platform, maybe she compromised in the respect of my work and I may compromise in the respect of her experience with the world. That kind of space was there in between us. There were times that we both were unable to compromise at all . . . and then there were common friends who used to help to create the space for both of us to come to a common platform in the respect of AB work. Regarding the work we maintained the relation as colleagues, at the same time our relation always stayed with me like it can't fit in a blood relation, and it won't be an unforgettable friendship. It is all above that . . . there is no name in this world which I can take for our relationship.

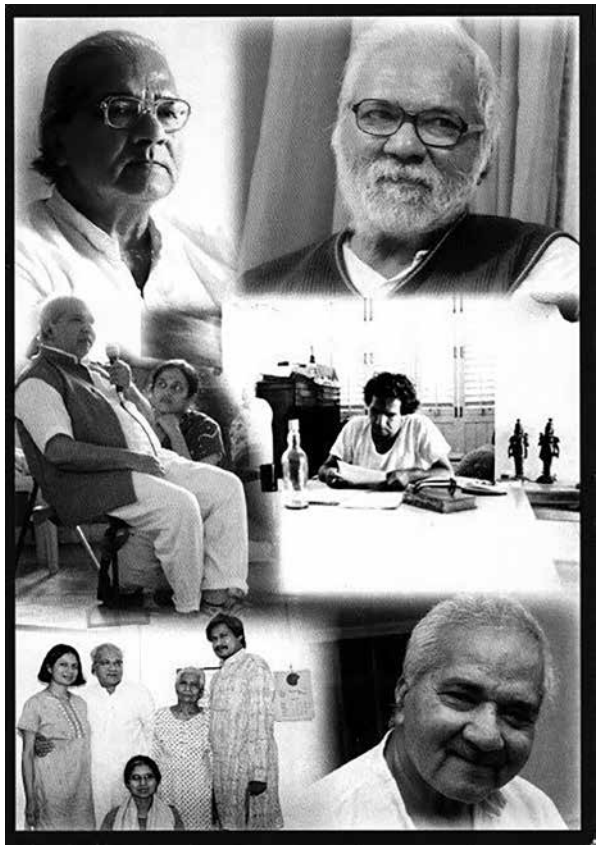
Vasant Palshikar (1936 - 2016)

Vasant was born and grew up in Hyderabad. He discontinued his course at the Hyderabad Agriculture University and from that time was involved in many activist groups including the Bhoodan Movement, the Sarvodaya Movement and the Service Civil International.

A prolific writer, mostly in Marathi also in English, Vasant wrote extensively from the early 1960s until September 2004 when he suffered a paralytic stroke. His writing covered a wide range of areas. Apart from analysing current affairs, he wrote on Gandhian thought, socialism, Marxism, on development, faith, blind belief, superstition, communalism, caste politics, Dalit issues, environmental issues.

Not just a well-read scholar, intellectual and writer, Vasant was a visionary, someone who could see far ahead of his times. He was a mentor, guide and friend to many. He was in close touch with young people, activists, both individuals and groups – those like Medha

Patkar and the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) who were resisting development projects – but also those working constructively with marginalized communities, reviving farming practices, creating alternatives to the mainstream in health, livelihoods, or education with a view to strengthening communities.



From 1981 Vasant was also involved in Parisar, a civil society organization working on lobbying and advocacy for environment and sustainable development, at a time when thinking about environmental issues was considered an indulgence, diverting attention from real issues concerning livelihoods for marginalized people.

In the early 1990s Vasant was part of a group that brainstormed and started Aksharnandan, an inclusive, non-competitive school in Pune

and he remained a key mentor for several years.

For many years Vasant played a significant role in the Network as an anchor and guide. He brought to the Network all his experience and critical insights from the different fields of education, tribal welfare, agricultural practices, development and environmental issues. One of the key contributions Vasant consistently made to the Network was to give education a wider scope. He did not see the Network merely as a group of school teachers but people involved in many different kinds of work. He says, "Education cannot be separated from every other aspect of life. If you keep your eyes open you will see that everything is changing – the situation of the poor and needy, the state of the environment and also the situation of employment." He continues, "The pursuit of (alternative) education can no longer be thought of apart from this change." He even questions the future of alternative spaces when he asks whether we can face the fact that such experiments may not be sustainable in the face of rapid change in technology and degradation and depletion of the earth's resources.

Vasant often challenged the group to go beyond what was comfortable or familiar and never to be complacent or stay still. In a talk in 2011, he warns us about areas that can be divisive – language, caste, class, privilege and lack of awareness. He asks the searching question – How alternative are we to dominant ideas of power, success and authority? Where are we in all this change that is happening around us? The Network, for him, was a microcosm of a vision of a new social order. How inclusive or exclusive are we? Are we relevant at this time? How aware are we responding to injustice and inequalities?

Vasant had a profound impact in shaping the Network and helped us all to look not only at the complex questions of social justice and environmental degradation, but also at the small details of the Network's way of functioning that included finances, membership, style of meeting and the making of Reports that could be shared with a wider community.[1]

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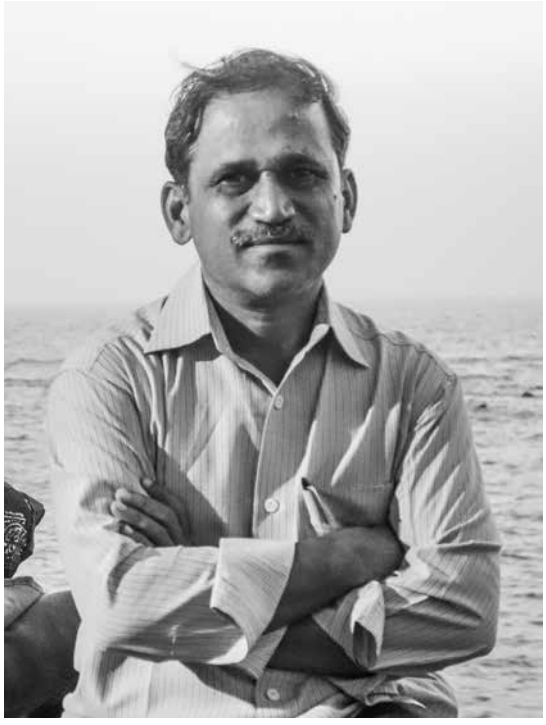
1 This note draws on material shared by Vidya Patwardhan, Anu Chandy and Jane Sahi. See also 'Vasant's Talk' in Network Meeting Report 19, pp. 3-6.

Venu Palshikar

Venu Palshikar passed on in 2023. She attended a number of the Network meetings. She was quite averse to too much talking and preferred at the meetings to give her undivided attention to any of the small children who happened to be there. She had worked as a Professor of Economics and greatly contributed by her translations of a number of books into Marathi including *The One-Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming* by M. Fukuoka.

Dr U. Subba Raju (1967 - 2017)



Krishna shared his memories;

> My first contact with Subba was to buy books. I was given his contact address to write a postcard making enquiries

about books for sale available with him. He wrote a postcard promptly and I remember ordering books via a money-order and the books reaching me via post . . . books like "*The One-Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming*" by Masanobu Fukuoka, "*How Children Fail*" by John Holt, "*Totto-Chan*", and other books that were inspirational.

Soon after, I met him in Timbaktu, when he had come to visit and spend time. I had gone for a site visit, as Anu and I were designing and building houses there. These were the very early days at Timbaktu; the land was a barren piece of land, parched dry, the sun radiating heat off the stone boulders, making it difficult to work outdoors at mid-morning even in mid- January!

I found him, warm and friendly, with a very earthy sense of humour. He was an idealist, determined to have an independent frugal life. His plan was to survive on earnings from his book sales, this in early 90s – and his books were priced Rs 15 to Rs 40 or so!

Soon he decided to put down his anchor in Timbaktu and started to work, teaching children. He, himself was qualified as an ABTech, MTech and PhD from IITs, yet he chose to work with children and soon set up a school built brick by brick (physically and metaphorically) with care, love and attention to details. The school was a haven for children from very poor families and often with tragic 'backgrounds and a lot of them could stay in the hostel.

He was an engineer at heart and designed a water supply and recycling system to minimise use of scarce water resources. Water was recycled to grow vegetables, fruits and trees in a very harsh landscape bereft of top soil. There were animals too – chickens, goats and cows. And even a large fish tank.

He was very keen to provide opportunities for children to work with materials and tools for he believed that "tinkering" with materials and technology is very useful to help children learn.

With his mainstream engineer friends he would keep abreast of the latest developments in tech and start wondering how he could bring them to Timbaktu and start making useful stuff. For example, when white LEDs first came out, he got his hands on a few and started to make DC bulbs and torches that were extremely energy efficient. Soon he started making different types of torches, including ones made with bamboo and white LED!!

The children in Timbaktu were happy, animated, full of energy and engaged in a lot of exciting adult activities (under careful guidance, of course). The school was soon an example of how a “Nai Talim” philosophy based education can be fun and contemporary — and more importantly – offer a fun, living, loving atmosphere for learning.

Anu and I had the privilege of becoming a friend of Subba and the Timbaktu Community and could observe closely as the Timbaktu School grew and were lucky to be able to spend time and take part in its activities. When we started Thulir Learning Centre, Timbaktu was an obvious choice to draw inspiration from and to interact closely. So exchanges of students in both directions were common. And especially when we started our own “hands on” work and workshop, Subba was our friend, philosopher and guide in that venture.

Having seen conventional “vocational” training courses fail and the depressing state of old Gandhian Nai Talim institutions, we were very wary of embarking on this path. We got much clarity and courage from the many chats with Subba that we would have, often through long sessions late into the night in the peace and quiet of Timbaktu after our children had gone to bed!

Soon we started improvising on Subba’s ideas of bamboo furniture, bamboo torches and set up LED based DC lighting in our campus, all made and put together by our students.

A memorable experience for me from those days was a solar electrification project we did a village near Tumkur for

Subba's friend. This was a farm house built off-grid. Subba had designed the Solar PV system and arranged for the components and equipment. Then he came with two of his students from Timbaktu and I went there with two students from Thulir. Over two and a half days (we had planned for 4 days to complete the task!), the students finished the job, working together without any hitches We felt so elated that day that we dreamt of buying an old bus, and going from project to project with our students and all our tools and building useful 'Stuff' for the community in exchange for food, shelter and lessons that we could learn from the community/ institution!! Alas that never came to pass, and Subba left us all tragically early.

Krishna, January, 2024

Christa Manjrekar (1934 - 2019)

This is part of a letter written by Ramdas on 12th December, 2019 to Christa's daughter and family on the occasion of her family and friends meeting to celebrate her life.

I am sitting in front of Bapu Kuti, here in Sevagram Ashram. This seems a good place to contemplate on Christa. Like Gandhiji, hers was a life well lived and to the full, but above all in the service of those who needed it most. I look back and cannot help recalling our common friend Vasant Palshikar, who was responsible for me being here today. Vasant too has left us and gone on. While these persons have enriched us, so many of us, I cannot but feel a deep sense of loss. We have all together walked a path, a difficult one, for over a quarter of a century. It has been a rewarding journey and that is why today we must celebrate Christa's life . . .

I remember distinctly her walking into the Gudalur meeting of the Alternative Education Network way back in 1993. I had no idea who she was, as it was Vasant who had invited her. Christa's husband, Dr Manjrekar and Vasant had been

friends. She attended every meeting since then as long as she could travel. Most of our meetings were held in rural schools with few comforts. Nothing deterred her. Her commitment to the Network and what it stood for was steadfast all along. In those early years when all the communication was through post and we found it very hard to meet the expenses of postage, stationery and printing and sometimes even travel for some, it was Christa's cheque year after year that kept us going. From 1993 onwards every year without fail we received a cheque from her.

I must admit that at first I found her forthright approach a bit daunting, but saw the value in her plain speaking as we went along. She did not mince words and spoke her mind without any hesitation. We have much to learn from such people. She was very practical and clear about what needs to done to set right an injustice. We did get an opportunity to visit the areas of her work in Srirangapatna and see the transformation there, among the girls in particular. We have also used her school space a number of times for the adivasi children from our school when we wanted to visit Mysore for school excursions.

I don't know how many times Rama and I have been to her home in Srirangapatna and she always insisted that we have a meal with her, which we were happy to do! On these occasions we saw how she paid attention to detail.

To Nima, the family gathered here, and friends who have come, we can say without hesitation that we were all so much the better for having known and associated with Christa. She was a pillar of strength to all of us.

Barely two weeks or so before her passing I received a call from Christa. She was apologetic –"it was a mistake", she said. But of course we had a long conversation about everybody and everything. I cannot help wondering if her phone call was not such a mistake after all. . . she wanted to say Good Bye to all of us.

Today as I sit here with Gandhiji, who wanted to reach out to the "least of our fellow-men", I cannot help thinking of people like Christa who have followed his path and touched the hearts of some of the most marginalised of our society. She will rise again amongst them and her unfinished task will continue.

So today let us celebrate this simple and great soul who gave us something to live for.

Tara Gopinath (1941 – 2021)

Tara – who journeyed with us[2]

As long as she could, Tara journeyed with us, from the very first meeting of the Network in Gudalur way back in 1993. It has been a long journey, and an arduous one especially

for her. Every meeting she attended we started it with Tara singing a bhajan in a mellifluous voice. Tara was simple,

2 A note written by Ramdas shortly after her passing.

straightforward and spoke from her heart with her feet on the ground. She never claimed to be a head of school but a mother to a community of children. Purna Pragna was not a school in any formal sense of the word, it was a large family.

The 2005 Network meeting was held in Purna Pragna school, Mysore. I remember it as being a highly intense meeting – especially the sharing sessions when we sat in the dark by candle light and talked late into the night.

Thank you, Tara for sharing your life with all of us and making the lives of all those children something to live for besides just being a cog in the wheel. On a few occasions, we have taken children from Vidyodaya to stay in Purna Pragna and spend time there. For Christa too, having Tara there was a major support.

Tara always held that it was her younger sister Malathi who taught her to teach and encouraged her to start Purna Pragna. It took a lot of courage and tremendous effort to keep it going and only those who were close to her knew what she went through managing family and school and the parents in the village around. But she persisted and for us it has been a

great privilege to have known her.

She will always be with us in our hearts.

Good bye Tara . . . you have friends where you go – Janaki Iyer, Vasant, Christa. . .

Shirly Mary Joseph (1959 - 2021)

Shirly's unexpected death from a heart attack in 2021 shocked us all as she had always been so active and engaged. She was the co-founder of 'Kanavu', an alternative education centre for Adivasi children along with KJ Baby in 1994. She was deeply involved in social and environmental issues in Wayanad and inspired through her way of life, many college students to become more aware of the concerns of a fast changing world. Shirly was very much part of the Network and is fondly remembered for her warmth, capacity for friendship and humour.

Charcoal drawing by Denzin

A poem dedicated to Shirly by Atreyee Day in January 2019 reads as follows:

In the Foreword to a book of Shirly's poems we read:

> To read Shirly's own poems is to hear her unmistakable voice present –here and now – just beside you. A voice that is quick, light and perceptive . . .
>
> Shirly's gift was to focus on an image that speaks of a pattern where all is related. The imagination does not conjure up some unlikely or idle fancy but brings together the inner and outer realities of a specific experience. The fleeting but indelible pictures present an inner landscape and create moods of watchfulness, quietness, wonder, tenderness, dryness, the surprise of meetings and journeys, folly and playfulness and fullness. . .
>
> I feel so glad that these poems, which Shirly probably never imagined would be published, will stay with us to keep in mind her generous, playful, caring spirit and to help us to become more receptive to the world that invites a resonance at every turn.[3]

3 Excerpts from the Foreword by Jane to a collection of Shirly's poems entitled, *Wild Jasmine* edited by Santhi Joseph.

Cresent moon looking up

From the one-foot pond-print mischief

Of that monsoon forager land-cloud

Young morning glory

Clinging up its way in the rains

Along the garden hose

10

The Regional Networks

Going forward there should be greater efforts to start regional networks. Only then will we have made the kind of impact that we want.

The national Network is a nurturing, caring and reflective space which has helped many of the members to re-examine their own world views. It has also facilitated deep sharing and has nurtured a sense of solidarity and support for one and all. Its intimate dialogues thrive with small numbers. Hence with new requests for people to join and with each local region requiring such a space, it was felt that local networks were the way forward.

From the experience of the TN Network (TAN-NET) and the Madhya Bharat Network, where there are so many teachers even in the government who are thinking differently, it is clear that there is a need for a forum where they can bounce off ideas and get support. So the expanding of these Networks is essential.

The Tamil Nadu Network (TAN-NET)

The text below is drawn from the responses of Ramdas, Christy Subathra[1], Harish and Anu S. to some questions about the working of the Tamil Nadu Network.

Beginnings

In one of the national Network meetings, I (Anu S.) remember Vasant looking around and asking us, " How many of us are from upper class and dominant castes? " All of us were!

---

1 Christy Subathra who is the founder of a school called CREA in Trichy. She is an author and poet and was also part of women' s movements in Tamil Nadu.

TAN-NET at Gudalur

Vasant then talked of having regional meetings in regional languages which could include people of more diverse backgrounds.
I see that happening in the Tamil Nadu Network meetings.

The first TAN-NET meeting was held in Sholai School, Kodaikanal in 2015. Since then there have been ten meetings and even two in 2021. There are usually about 25 participants. Of those about a third are newcomers to the Network family.

Members initially were invited from a list compiled by multiple people. If I remember, Salai was one of them who came up with many contacts. Initially, we (Poornima and Harish) visited many of them personally and then had conversations with them to understand their views as educators. Then we also asked them if they would be interested in and would benefit from such a space.

Based on this, we invited them to the first TAN-NET. At the last moment, there were also people who we reached out through phone/ email.

Age composition is quite mixed. I see less of people from 20-30

years. Rather, the age range from 30 - 50 seems a majority; 50 plus also has members. Most of them are teachers. There are also people who work with educational policies, teacher trainers etc. But most of them do varied work at their own places which is not only direct classroom teaching.

Most members are interested directly or indirectly in education. The group has a stability with many members feeling invested in the process of dialogue and also experiencing a sense of togetherness.

The spirit of the TAN-NET

The Tamil Nadu Network meetings provide a great point of learning and relief for those of us who look for a fresh air in education. The genuine concerns, worries and challenges are addressed without any kind of inhibitions or mental blocks. In fact the deliberations and discussions in the meets provide guidance and energy for the rest of the year. You are assured of a group of co-travellers who would understand and acknowledge the different path we have chosen for our educational journey. Personally, the type of ambience, cordiality and comradeship we enjoy in this meet are a boost to strengthen our own selves.

True educational interaction, philosophical search, gender equality, concern for environment, art, culture and ethnicity, democratic values, innovation and healthy controversies make our meets holistic. And it feels pleasant that you are part of a group that shares a common political understanding of education.

The language factor

Tamil has created a sense of familiarity. It has made the dialogue easier, accessible and hence inclusive.

I, (Anuradha from Thulir) don't know if I can put it on the language itself. But there are very few dialogues on nature, climate change and issues connected to that. As of now conversations are centred around looking at social problems and issues and conflicts emanating from

that. So there is a localised flavour to many of the concerns that we discuss.

For me personally, I am very comfortable in English communication; I was brought up in an English medium school, read more English books than Tamil, write, talk and even think in English and find it easier to describe abstract concepts in English. But yet I talk more in the TAN- NET meetings than in the national Network meetings. I am wondering why.

Probably there is still a block in articulating personal beliefs and thoughts in English . . . does one set higher standards for oneself when it comes to English than the mother tongue? There is diffidence and hesitation that one is not as articulate in English as X or Y in the group. But with the mother tongue there is no hesitation even when you speak it badly or make mistakes.

Having Thamizh as the language of the meeting has definitely opened up the forum to participants of all caste, class, rural, urban, ages, social settings. The language has helped everyone bring up diverse issues. And the issues raised are from diverse lived experiences and hence are rich and locally rooted/flavoured.

Some issues raised

In the second TAN-NET meeting at Vidyavanam, Anaikatti, one Government school headmaster shared his experiences during the personal sharing session. He talked of how he had worked hard all his life to gain equality of status through education and though he was now posted as a headmaster of a government school in a village he still faced discrimination and marginalization from the caste Hindu village parents because of the caste he was born into. He was even taunted as ‘rising above his true self’ just for wearing a full sleeved shirt and pant!

The fact that he felt comfortable, safe and nurtured in this forum to share this deep hurt was evident. For the rest of us this was a huge learning and a lesson on the realities of caste discrimination.

In the meeting at Payir, Thenur, one urban teacher raised the question, “Aren’t we perpetuating caste by asking for one’s caste in all the application forms? Why can’t we remove that, make everyone casteless and move towards a casteless society?”

The whole room erupted with the rural, tribal and Dalit teachers responding from their hearts about how they had been deprived of their rights, resources and dignity for so many generations, and of how the community certificate and reservation were their only hope towards equity, education and a livelihood. And even that community certificates were unobtainable for so many oppressed communities who truly needed them. One teacher remarked, “Even in a meeting like this of highly thoughtful like-minded people, why do terms like, ‘upper castes’ and ‘ lower castes’ still get used? Don’t you people see the oppression and domination in these labels themselves?”

At the same meeting, while talking about the Basic Technology Course conducted for 10 years at Thulir, (a pedagogical attempt to teach adolescent school walk-outs academic subjects, language, math, etc., social and personal analysis through practical real-life projects in building, farming, computers, electronics etc.) one urban participant remarked that rural children were better than urban children in hand skills and this again created a furore of responses! While teachers from Marudam, Vidyodaya and Thulir were talking of integrating hands on skills and crafts in their curriculum, the others saw this as vocational skills being thrust on oppressed caste children and denying the fact that they could be skilled in academic subjects as well. And that this had the danger of caste based vocations being perpetuated. One teacher remarked, “My parents and grandparents have struggled for generations for our community’s right to get educated itself and if I ever have to choose between learning rocket science or farming, I would choose rocket science.” The animated and participatory discussions over this continued for the next three hours at least! It was a highly illuminating session and a lesson in providing solidarity, empathy and support without being patronizing.

I don’t know if a concrete title or theme has been there for a meeting. But it’s mostly individuals sharing their concerns and people responding to that. Discussions have generally tended to emanate from this basis. Topics include gender and sexuality education for

boys in particular, addressing caste inequalities in local contexts, nature education, the role of a teacher in general, interfaces with government and authorities, working with hands and general discussions on the pedagogy of doing work and gaining life skills, screen usage and the role of technology in general, some discussions on the pandemic and the impact on children and learning spaces, etc.

Relationship between the National Network and the Regional Network

There are similarities and differences. This being a new group, the sharing has been fluid and without much hesitation. So quality of the dialogue is more spontaneous. The TAN-NET is similar in a way that it retains the informal nature of the national Network. But there is an element of freshness due to members being relatively new to each other. In the national Network members have known each other for decades and hence the dialogues feel different. I am not able to put my finger on this. But the feeling is different.

The national Network has a tremendous spirit of keeping personal sharing alive. This comes due to people knowing each other for a long time and having cultivated a deep sense of embracing each other with an appreciation of subjective journeys. The TAN-NET is yet to have this depth of sharing, although I see a definite potential and possibility. It is still juvenile on this front.

Two things I see are to strengthen the space around personal sharing. This adds a very different quality to the meetings, our own personal lives and a general sense of cohesion and solidarity amongst individuals.

Secondly, I would want to talk more about climate change. Because people work with communities that are facing climate change first hand. So I would like to discuss more on this front and possible approaches, actions etc.

Also I do see a great potential of working together outside of the meeting. Due to proximity of schools, exchange of resources and opportunities seems very real and it is already happening too. I would like this to continue and be strengthened.

Madhya Bharat Network/Hindi Network

Prayaag Joshi contributed the following note.

I had shared with Ramdas the idea of a network of Hindi speaking people engaged in education, when we met in Bengaluru for a couple of days to brainstorm about the Network. Arun and Ramgopal and Jane had also come for that meeting.

Soon after returning from that meeting, I drew up a list of people working in / with schools in Central India with the help of Sushamatai, my friends in Chhattisgarh and in Eklavya, Bhopal. As advised by Ramdas, I also drew up a plan and visited as many of these people as possible, sharing with them the history of the existing Network, what the Network was and what it wasn't, what we did together as a group of individuals and what we did not. I mentioned David Bohm's thoughts on dialogue, and the idea of adding a Network of Hindi speaking individuals to the existing one. During these meetings I got glimpses of the nature of the interest and curiosity of each of these individuals in the idea of the Network and some information about their work. I did not have to invite any of them. Whoever got interested just came in.

We had our first meeting in December 2017 in the Nai Talim premises in Sevagram, the second one in Eklavya, Hoshangabad in December 2018, the third one in Kumharpara village, Kondagaon district, Chhattisgarh in December 2019, and the fourth one in January 2021 over Zoom.

We had an initial list of 55 invitees who were spread across 9 states. About 23 attended the first meeting and the attendance at every subsequent meeting fell progressively. Less than half of the number that attended meetings were directly teaching or running schools, and the others were associated with educational initiatives that involved the government or other organizations. The sharing at all meetings was endearing, authentic, frank, educative, humorous, startling and diverse. The use of Hindi ensured that no one felt out of place (except Ramdas perhaps Rama or one of us ensured English translations at timely intervals).

I felt that an important factor that may have contributed to the dwindling attendance at our meetings or the lack of interest to host meetings amongst the members of the Hindi Network could be the lack of a shared need to be among others for a period of two and half days without an agenda or an objective. In today's world it is perhaps easy for people to feel connected with one another over WhatsApp! In this aspect, I don't see much difference between the larger Network group and the Hindi Network group. I think those of us in the Hindi Network who have stuck on have needs that are similar to those in the larger Network who have stuck on and come for its meetings without much ado. There could be other reasons too . . . but I think for most of the dropouts it was the lack of a strong urge.

One person noted that meetings varied according to who was present :

> Over the last few years, I had a few opportunities to be part of different groups in their early days, including Madhya-Bharat and Maharashtra Networks. When I try to reflect on my experience with each of these groups, I see that each one of them had its own unique journey. And currently I resonate with the thought that 'members of the group determine the direction of the group every time they interact with each other individually or in smaller / larger groups – sometimes consciously, but often unconsciously''. Depending on one's personality, needs and beliefs at that point in time one might influence the group to different degrees. I guess, the pursuit should be to make it as conscious as possible.

Maharashtra Network

Maharashtra Network at Vinchurni near Phaltan, 2018

This note has been written by Adwait Deshpande.

The idea of regional meets began with the Tamil meeting in 2017, I think. When we heard the reflections of this meeting in the bigger group, we started exploring if we could do something similar in Maharashtra. By this time one meeting for the Central India had also taken place. With gentle but firm nudges from Rama Akka and Ramdas Anna, we started acting on it. 'We' began primarily with Vidyatai, Ruby and I (whom I had met in the Central India meet). Krunal was always a constant supporter. Ruby and I met at Vidyatai's to talk about how we would approach this initiation. It was very nice to hear from Vidyatai about the history of the beginning of the Network, and also of Aksharnandan school. We talked about the purpose of the meet, the approach to invitations, how to think about facilitation, etc. It was decided that we have another slightly bigger meeting of educators from Maharashtra who have been a part of the bigger Network meet. This will help us develop synergy for the meet, make a list of people to invite, and in general connect after a long time. So

the bigger meeting involved Sushamatai from Sevagram, Vinodini and Deepalitai from Nashik, Suchitatai from Kolhapur, Shubhadatai from Pune, Madhuratai from Phaltan, Vidyatai, Ruby and myself. This was an important meeting as there were so many things discussed. Most importantly, we developed criteria to invite people for the first meet. It would be difficult to explain this as we reached upon an understanding after a long discussion. But in short, we proposed people that we knew and would recommend for the meet and speak about our experience with them. Others who knew them would add, if they want to, and then we took a group call to invite them. It turned out that most names were selected, and one or two were debated upon. If memory serves me right, the issue of the debate only pertained to our opinion of whether the person in question would respect the space of dialogue.

After this meeting, we translated the piece on dialogue by David Bohm. Vidyatai took tremendous efforts in making sure that each statement reflects the intended meaning.

We decided our first venue to be in a village called Vinchurni near Phaltan. This was because we wanted a space in the midst of trees and soil. We all knew about this 100 acre farmland that was lovingly cared for by Babulal Gandhi and his nieces. It was a beautiful location that could support our basic accommodation needs.

Soon we called the people on the list and invited them for our first meeting. It was clumsy at first, but fun to explain what the meeting was about. It was not easy to explain to people that we would be meeting for three days and had no other agenda that to share and hear others. Truth be told, we were pretending to know what we were doing. We were also anxious about how this group of 30 plus educators would sit together and have coherent but unplanned dialogue!

Our list of 50 plus people solidified into 26 confirmations.

The accommodation was arranged, people had confirmed their plans, we were ready. Vidyatai, Prayaag, Krunal and Ruby arrived a day before the meeting. We discussed ways in which we could facilitate the sessions, and waited for the next day.

Instead of describing all the three days of the meet, I am copy-pasting here the email we wrote to Rama Akka and Ramdas Anna after the meet:

> *Dear Ramdas Anna and Rama Akka,*
>
> *It finally happened!*
>
> *Last Friday to Sunday, 26 of us met in Phaltan and tried to begin the process of dialogue. Since I wouldn't do justice trying to describe the meeting in a mail, I will share some of the high points:*
>
> *A few of us (Vidyatai, Prayaag, Krunal, Ruby and I) met the night before and tried to think through the structure of the meeting. It was fun trying to identify what, if anything, could help begin a free flowing dialogue. Finally, after minimal structure, we were ready to face the next day when everyone came.*
>
> *The morning began at Kamala Nimbkar school, where Manjiritai introduced us to the school, told us anecdotes, stories and practices.*
>
> *For the next one and a half days, we discussed about various issues that spontaneously crept up. Such as whether words can corrupt intended meaning, whether the society is moving towards multilingualism, the nature of interventions needed in adivasi communities etc. While doing this, we kept on referring to dialogue, and wondered whether we were having one. There were a lot of disagreements in the beginning, and quite impatient reactions too.*
>
> *But by the evening of the second day, we slowly moved towards a reflective session. People discussed the questions they had come with, and some responded to other's questions.*
>
> *We had three lovely sharing sessions. The sharing was intimate and brought the entire group closer like magic.*

Some of us had a lovely time talking over a campfire till late night. On the last morning, we discussed everyone's feeling about the process, and most of them shared that they would like to come back. There was also a sort of consensus that we should try and bring this same group together for two to three times, so that we bond more, and then consider making the group bigger, and inviting more people.

All in all, I think it went superbly, and I hope the group continues for the next few years, after which, I am sure, it will take a life of its own. I'm attaching a photo that we clicked together. Have a look and marvel at the skewed gender ratio!

We were quite happy after this meet. For the next year, we roped in Pranali, another friend from the meet, to help us coordinate the effort. It was decided that we would have the next meeting on August 2019. It was quite a task to restart this coordination and invite people again. We had fewer confirmations, around 15. But that is when the flash floods and incessant rains disrupted all activities in Maharashtra. Kolhapur was under water, and Nashik too, was very wet. Consequently, most people cancelled, and only 5 people met in Nashik. This was a huge disappointment for us, and I had underestimated how much energy and time was to be put in to ensure consistency.

The next year went in recovering from the lockdown, and our meetings discontinued after that. Upon reflection with Prayaag and Vidyatai, we realised that we should be putting more efforts on developing personal relationships rather than just arranging an annual meet.

In a way, some of us have remained in touch with some schools through WhatsApp, but the annual meeting hasn't been coordinated since.

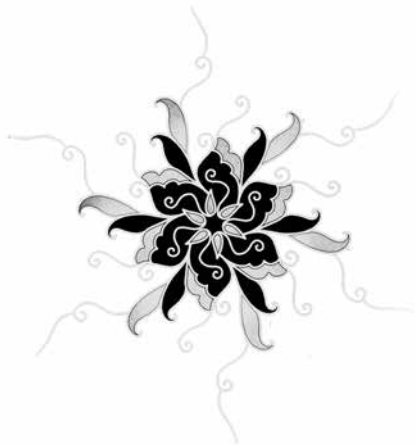
To respond to your question about inclusivity, although I am reflecting six years after our first meet, I remember everyone feeling comfortable in sharing in Marathi. But do I think that we were being inclusive in terms of developing a diverse group? Perhaps not as much as we could have. I mostly remember a group of upper caste

educators, mostly founders or leadership position holders in schools or publications. The logistical and practical constraints of long travel may also be restrictive for many to travel, but if I were to do this again, I would certainly be more conscious of it. Maharashtra has multiple networks of educators and there is a lot of scope to learn from them.

Finally, as a personal reflection, I felt that the coordination was very exhausting for Ruby, Pranali and me. Perhaps a bigger team and more organic planning will help to develop a better Network experience.

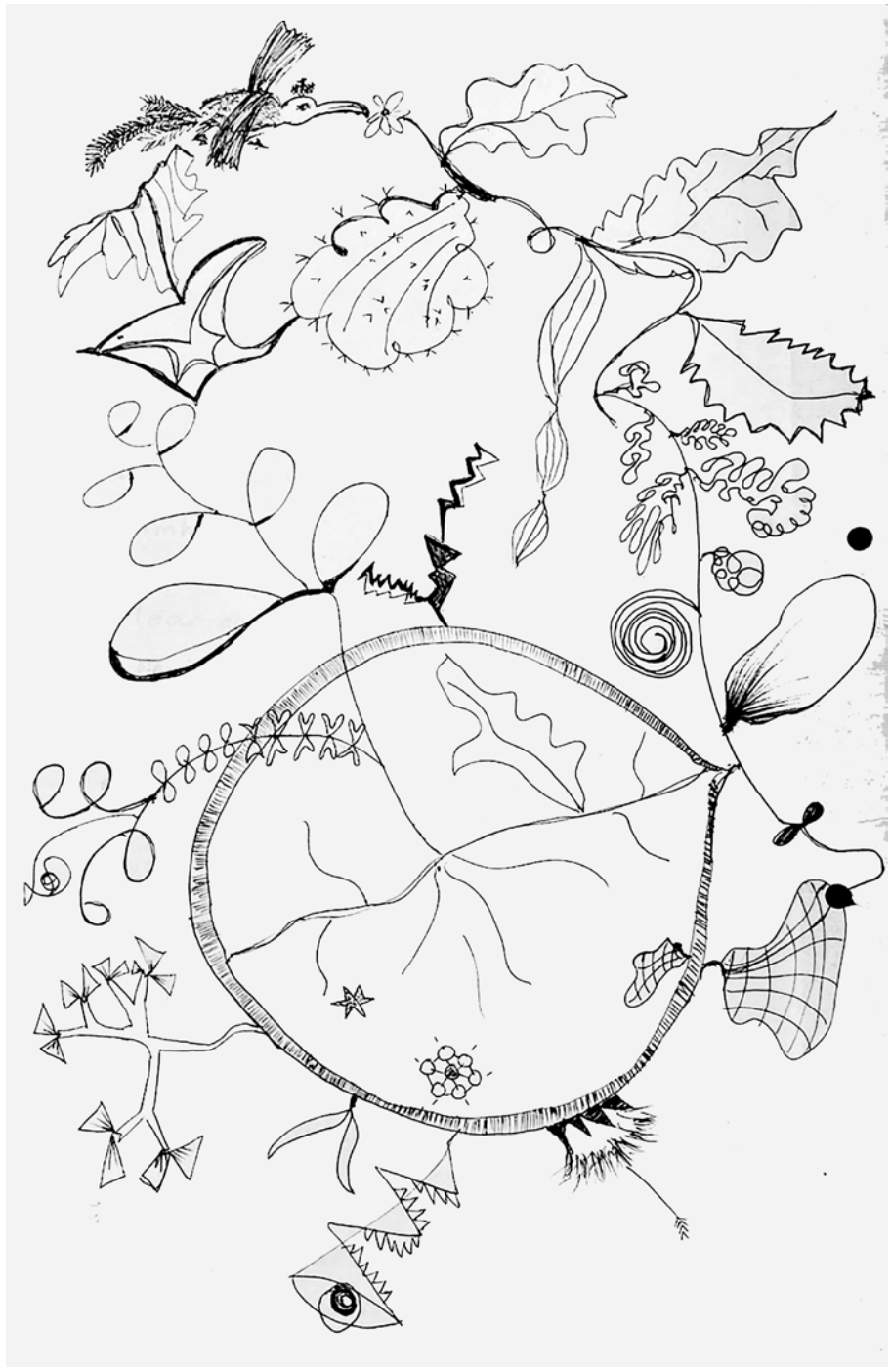
Conclusion

The three regional networks that have emerged so far have each developed in quite different ways. It is to be hoped that these and other groups will grow and thrive depending on the place and people involved. As has been stressed such groups would give a new impetus and energy to the Network as a whole.



Afterword /After-image: Meeting All Seasons

In sorting out a box of papers related to the Network from 1993 which included maps, letters, postcards, accounts and notes, this unnamed, untitled image rather mysteriously appeared! It was probably done in 1995 but so far, despite our efforts to trace its source, no one has claimed to be its maker. It seems to capture something of the pathways of our three decades of journeying together with all its energy of surprises, spurts of growth, and diverse explorations within an organic network. It has been a meeting of all seasons – movement and stillness, and a natural blur of beginnings and endings, new life and old, shadows and lightness.



APPENDIX I

Education Network Meetings: DATES, VENUES, THEMES.

1	1993, November	Gudalur, Theppakadu, Mudumalai	Sharing Life Experiences
2	1994	Pasthapur, Deccan Development Society	Open discussion
3	1995 December	Alampoondi, Gandhi Rehabilitation Centre	Sustainable Education
4	1996 November	Bangalore, Vikasana	Craft, Tagore and Gandhi
5	1997 December	Bangalore, Visthar	Open discussion
6	1998	Bangalore, Visthar	Spirituality
7	1999 November	Wayanad, Kanavu	Community and School
8	2000	Pune, Beninger's Institute	Violence
9	2001 October	Belgaum, Gandhi Bhavan	Freedom and Discipline
10	2002 November	Bangalore, Centre for Learning	Understanding History
11	2003 November	Mysore, Purna Pragna	Sharing Our Experiences
12	2004 November	Hyderabad, Centre for Learning	Language and Culture
13	2005 November	Nashik, Anand Niketan	Well-being
14	2006 November	Dharmapuri, Puvidham	Meaning of Alternative
15	2007 November	Silvepura, Sita School	Teacher as Learner and Learner as Teacher
16	2008	Phaltan, Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan	Open discussion
17	2010, January	Sewagram, Anand Niketan	Work and Education
18	2011 January	Sittilingi, Thulir	Play, Right to Education Act, Uncertainty
19	2012, February	Gudalur, Vidyodaya	Right to Education Act, Caste
20	2013, February	Bangalore, Centre for Learning	Saffronisation of the Curriculum
21	2014, January	Tiruvannamalai, Marudam Farm School	Vivekananda
22	2015, January	Hyderabad, Krishnamurti Study Centre	Spirituality

23	2016, January	Belgaum, Harmony Ashram, Uchgaon	*Hope Beneath Our Feet*
24	2017, February	Chennai, Theosophical Society	Remembering Vasant
25	2018	Chennai, Theosophical Society	Dissent
26	2019,	Sittilingi, Thulir	Creativity
27	2020, February	Hyderabad, CHAI Palliative Care Centre	Environmental Crisis
28	2020, October	Online zoom	Open discussion
29	2021, June	Online zoom	Open discussion
30	2022, May	Bangalore, Shibumi	Reflecting on the Journey of the Network
31	2023, May	Bangalore, Centre for Learning	Privilege, Critical feedback culled from members' responses
32	2024, February	Thiruvannamalai, Marudam Farm School	Tribal Culture and Education
33	2025 February	Belgaum, Marathi Vidya Niketan	Open discussion

APPENDIX II

A questionnaire prepared by Gurveen, Jane, Ramgopal, Yashodara, Rama and Ramdas was sent to all past and present people associated with the Network in April, 2022.

1. Beginning of Network - If you were present in the early meetings how and why do you feel the Network took shape?
2. When, why and how did you join the Network? What were your first impressions?
3. What for you characterizes the Network? What do you think holds the Network together ?
4. Please share some particular or special memories, images, songs from Network meetings.
5. What for you are some of the significant themes discussed and questions raised in the Network?
6. Do you feel free to share opinions, ask questions or be critical of points being discussed during meetings? How do you think the group has coped with tensions and difficult situations or differences that have come up sometimes during the meetings?
7. How do you think the Network has changed over the years?
8. How is or has your family related to the Network?
9. How have interactions with the Network impacted your work place?
10. Ways forward: Is there something about the Network that you would like to see changed? How do you think the Network should move forward?

APPENDIX III

Brief Notes on Members

Adwait Deshpande trained as an engineer and studied education. He has taught in different schools for a few years. At the moment he has begun a small startup in Sevagram and is trying to learn the challenges of running a small business along with some of his students and young friends.

Amit Deshwal writes, “I take care of a small community learning space called The Little Grove. Here children and teachers together shape their curriculum and learning paths, hand in hand. It’s not about grades and competition, but about helping each other. I also love making music and doing woodcarving.”

Amrita Patwardhan heads education portfolio of the Tata Trusts that focuses on addressing quality and equity in education for disadvantaged communities. Along with early learning, Amrita is passionate about children’s literature and reading promotion work.

Ankita R. cherishes leisure and enjoys spending time observing and documenting the goings-on in the natural world. She now works on facilitating and designing experiences for children and adults to nurture their unique connection with the natural world. She also writes from time to time on her blog : https://earthlingideas.substack.com

Anu and Rajan Chandy write,“We have been living and teaching at the Rishi Valley School near Madanapalle in AP since 1995.Anu, who retired in May 2022, taught English and Environmental Science to 6-12 year olds as well as anchoring the preschool group for the kids of resident staff. Rajan, an ex-activist, now interested in Buddhism, has been teaching Economics at the senior school since 1999. For both of us, living and working with children in a boarding school like Rishi Valley continues to be a very educative and enriching experience.

Anuradha P. writes, “I worked at Ananda Bharathi in Hyderabad from 1991 – 2009. I have been engaged with education related trainings for women and children. I also have been engaged with training in community library practices. At present I am doing a course in Narrative Practices of India. I have published a number of stories and songs for adults and children in Telugu. I want people to be more sensitive towards gender and caste issues.”

Anu and Krishna are architects by training and educationists by passion! They have lived and worked with rural and tribal communities for the last 35 years. They started a learning centre called Thulir in Sittilingi valley, Tamilnadu, in 2004. They love being students and learning something new each day!

Arun and Poornima They have both been educators for nearly three decades. Arun worked in the Krishnamurti school and Poornima worked in the Olcott Memorial School run by the Theosophical Society for over a decade before they moved to Tiruvannamalai. They started the Marudam Farm School along with a group of friends and like-minded people. The Marudam Farm School is located on an organic farm and is run by the Forest Way Trust which is involved in ecological regeneration work in the Arunachala Hill and surrounding areas. Marudam School is exploring an experiential nature oriented approach in education.

Ashok H Biradar writes, “I came to Bangalore from a small village called Bijjargi in Bijapur District, North Karnataka. At the age of seven, I joined The Valley School (KFI) as a student with support of a Govt. Scholarship, because I had special ability with numbers and could do advanced calculations. After my education I worked at Centre for Learning, Bangalore as part of the school community for 30 years. In 2017 with the intent of giving back something to my village, I started a Trust “BERRI BIJJARGI”. The inspiration for this is the 12th century Mathematician and Astronomer Bhaskaracharya, who is believed to have been born in Bijjargi, my village. I want to develop BERRI BIJJARGI into a resource centre to promote mathematics and astronomy. Right now the institute is still in its developmental stage.”

Atreyee D. has illustrated and written, taught art in a small school and a residential school. She has co-facilitated community art workshops

using lowcost, found, waste and natural material with Blaise. She introduced personal history, journalling, conversations, music as a tool for self-reflection. This lead to hand-made and printed books of stories, songs and poetry, collages, drawings, sometimes shadow puppets even quilts.

Deborah D. is an interdisciplinary academic interested in exploring community-based practices, socio-technical systems and motivations underlying ecological actions. She is always looking for ideas and collaborations to co-design culturally inclusive and responsive spaces that facilitate learning of the interconnections between ecology and well-being through land-based pedagogies. An avid gardener, she enjoys collecting seeds, stories and recipes. Her other literary rambles can be accessed at https://linktr.ee/deborahdutta

Deepa Pandit writes, “Connected to this network through Malathiakka of Vikasana. Taken few jumps in life - moved from USA to India, software professional to teacher, working towards moving closer to nature (city to village), volunteering at various organizations (government schools, NGOs for special needs, mainstream and alternative schools), facilitating child centric methods of learning, life education through stories, counselling students and supporting environment initiatives.”

Dhruva Desai is a school teacher currently moonlighting as a college teacher. In both his personal and professional life, he spends most of his time either reading and thinking about children’s literature or playing things and thinking about play and physical education.

Diba Siddiqi has been engaged in sketching, painting, printmaking and photography. She has studied biology, anthropology and public health. She has worked in Bikaner with the Urmul Trust and has been closely connected to the Gurukala Botanical Sanctuary in Wayanad. She has been teaching, Social Science, photography and art at Centre for Learning, Bengaluru. She enjoys working on the land, in the vegetable garden.

Gurveen Kaur is a co-founder of Centre for Learning, Secunderabad, an alternative education centre where she spent 40+ years deepening her understanding of education while educating children

and teachers. Gurveen facilitates a safe space for meaningful conversations for young adults and adults. Along with three friends, she brings out *Edu-Care*, a publication examining education and related themes. Gurveen loves learning, reading and Philosophy.

Indira Vijaysimha is an educationist who has been exploring ways to make school education ecologically conscious for many decades. In 1995, inspired by Rabindranath Tagore and his philosophy of education, she founded an alternative school in Bangalore, called Poorna Learning Centre. She has been associated with Bhoomi College for several years and is delighted to be on the advisory committee of the Teach for Nature fellowship program. She has also served as faculty at Azim Premji University and welcomed the opportunities it gave to discuss education in a wider context. Post-retirement she has renewed her work at Poorna Learning Centre and is currently involved in strengthening community level initiatives to promote sustainable living through the newly formed Bija Trust.

Jane Sahi taught in Sita School for a number of years. She has been engaged in teaching at the Library Educators' Course at Bookworm in Goa. She is presently involved in a Learners' Centre in Bengaluru that works with local government schools particularly in relation to library activities and sessions with children looking at nature through observation, stories and art work.

N.V. Harish has been a part of Marudam Farm School for the past 12 years. He is an accidental teacher who landed up in Marudam after working with the Students Sea Turtle Conservation Network in Chennai. He continues to do sea turtle conservation and works primarily with the older children in Marudam Farm School.

Krunal Desai finds joy in listening to and understanding journeys of individuals and organisations. He has been fortunate to have opportunities to experience and be part of different journeys. He has diverse non-unified interests like - open learning spaces, tribal worldview, Gandhi's ideas, organisation and participatory practices, social parenting, and wellbeing.

Lara Patwardhan is a molecular biologist by training and an educator at heart. Lara is academic coordinator of Aksharnandan school

in Pune. She leads the elementary section of the school and has developed a pedagogic and curricular framework for teaching of English as a second language.

Madhura Rajvanshi has been teaching English at a Marathi medium school in Phaltan, Maharashtra for the past sixteen years. Using art, music, and students' real-life experiences, she strives to make learning engaging and relevant. She nurtures creativity by guiding students in writing and illustrating their own English storybooks. In another role as education coordinator, Madhura works to make the school a joyful, inclusive space for both children and teachers from diverse backgrounds.

Malathi M.C. "I was born in Jog. I did my schooling in different government schools and colleges mostly in Mysore and then taught for a year in a regular school. I did an M.A. in Kannada literature. I was trained at Neel Bagh for two years - which was wonderful! I started Vikasana with the help of David Horsburgh and Leila Pawar and worked there for 39 years."

American-born **Maxine Berntsen** lived for 46 years in Phaltan, a town in Western Maharashtra, where she founded an education society and KNB, a Marathi-medium school. With Jai Nimbkar she co-authored a set of books to teach Marathi to adult learners. Maxine and Jane Sahi later collaborated in developing and teaching First Language Pedagogy in TISS, Mumbai.

Manjiri Nimbkar has been active in the field of education since 1995 in the capacity of a teacher, a head teacher, administrator, curriculum designer, course developer and capacity builder for educators. Her main interests are Early Childhood education books and libraries. Recently she has been working with the Salokha group to build brotherhood between various groups.

Meenakshi Umesh: I am an architect by training and a farmer by choice. I started Puvidham learning centre in 2000 with the humble hope that nature will teach the children directly while they work in the garden and care for themselves and the space. I also provide support to mainstream schools to help education for sustainability become mainstream instead of just being alternative!

Neela Apte - Always been passionate about meaningful and joyful learning. Inspired by Vinoba Bhave's thoughts on education. Worked in various educational initiatives. At present, based in Belgaum, Karnataka and working at Marathi Vidya Niketan school to bring in an alternative holistic perspective in teaching learning processes in the school.

Nyla Coelho lives in Belgaum. She has published a number of books including *Our Land, Our Life: A curriculum for children of rural communities in India*.
She writes:

> Besotted by jungle springs, mountains green
> Quiet damp roads to the countryside bring
> Innocent mischief in children's eyes
> Inexorable grit of the rustic spine
> These and more, four decades on
> Submit to the beckoning yoke, for a Now
> Befitting all of Creation's very own

Padma Sarangapani is Professor of Education at TISS, Mumbai and is currently leading the Centre of Excellence in Teacher Education. Her interests include teacher education, culture and pedagogy. Padma led the development of the MA Education (Elementary) in which several members of the Network participated and contributed.

Pranali finds joy and satisfaction being with children; especially adolescents. She is fascinated by the way adolescents connect their experiences and wisdom with the universe. She has interest in understanding how society thinks and find ways and answers for themselves. Pranali finds utmost peace being with the nature; in jungles, mountains and is also an amateur birder.

Pranith works with Bachpan Banao, a community-based organization in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh. His mission is to make public education meaningful and inclusive for tribal children, viewing it as a tool for social justice. At Bachpan Banao, he along with his team run "Sapno Ki Shala," a school that explores culturally relevant pedagogies connecting education with tribal languages, culture, and daily life. He also works with government schools through teacher networks.

Prayaag Joshi is a school teacher interested in holding and exploring with others questions relating to the self. He is also part of a trust that helps needy children continue with their formal education and has founded and run a rural school for tribal children in Bastar, Chhattisgarh. He is presently working in CFL Bengaluru.

Ram and Archana - After a brief stint in the corporate domain, Archana and Ram shifted to Sttilingi in 2016, a tribal village in Dharmapuri district, Tamil Nadu. They are part of the Thulir team and work with children, young and old. They enjoy being with kids and are strong believers in the transformative power of quality education.

Rama and Ramdas started their educational journey in Pondicherry in a school for under-privileged children run by their friends Sharada and Shankar. Since 1991 they have been working with the adivasi community in the Gudalur Block of the Nilgiris, focusing their activities in education. They also run Vidyodaya adivasi school, for this purpose.

Ramgopal K. writes, “My work in the last over 17 years has been to attempt to create spaces for learning that are democratic, caring, wholistic and conducive for conversations and self-reflective inquiry for adults and children. It has also been the means for me to reflect upon my own work, beliefs, life, and lifestyle. My concern and interest these days has been inner work and healing and I have been learning Psychotherapy to help in healing both for myself and hopefully to help the people I come in touch with.”

Revathi R. founded Vanavil School along with some friends and a bunch of amazing children belonging to the nomadic tribes. Trained in Mathematics she worked as a journalist and filmmaker before taking the plunge into happy education. Dabbles in writing, translation, publishing and theatre when she finds the time.

Ruby R.P. writes,” Healthy body and mind, healthy and loving and ready-to-help and economically-socially well off family with a strong value system, great friends and colleagues, choice of work, very interesting life experiences to learn from, blessed with less needs . . . The list keeps growing. I work for free at a few schools and NGOs on projects in the field of relatable education, I am a paid consultant in

the field of learning and development at a company and I am a paid visiting faculty at a college for MSc Maths."

Sakthivel writes, "I've been on a quest to understand what makes education truly meaningful. Along the way, I've been drawn to the interplay between structure and freedom, exploring how to strike the right balance. I love working with younger children—their curiosity, creativity, and spontaneity continually inspire me. Recently, I've focused on inner work and healing, learning psychotherapy for my growth and to be a meaningful presence for others."

L.S. Saraswathi writes, "I have used my specialization in Home Science Education & Extension Education, Adult Education and Non-Formal Education for Children, and Sociology, in varied contexts of teaching at all levels, consultancy, evaluation and research. My focus has consistently been 'On Learners, Their Knowledge & Wisdom and Integration of the same with Educational Content' whether in literacy education or math. I have been closely involved in developing and printing child friendly reading materials "KATHAI ARUVI" (a set of 100 story cards) in Tamil, which have been translated into several Indian languages and used widely in rural area.

Shivaji Kaganikar, is a well-known Sarvodayee social activist in Belgaum region. Over the last five decades he is a friend, philosopher and guide to many people in and around Belgaum who are active in the field of rural / social development, environmental or nature conservation. Presently he is working in the area of livelihood and empowerment of villagers, especially women, through education, organic farming and employment guarantee schemes.

Shreekumar R. writes, "I left working as a chemical engineer in an offshore oilfield of ONGC, as I preferred to study further at the IISc. There I got involved with a group formed on the issue of communal harmony, but later was concerned with all issues of inequity. I spent some time with the Narmada Bachao Andolan and about four years with the Sampoorna Kranti Vidyalaya in Gujarat. Since 2007, I have been living on a farm near Udupi, trying to build a commune of people living a life of voluntary simplicity, doing agriculture and conducting workshops on sustainability." He is one of the authors of the book, *Transition Town Movement,* 2023.

Shubhada Joshi is an architect by education. She has been working with Khelghar, an activity centre for slum children for more than 25 years. Towards joyful learning is the vision of Khelghar. Khelghar is in capacity building of teachers. They conduct workshops and have published books as well. Along with the founder members, she has been one of the key members in producing Palakneeti, a monthly magazine for parents and teachers on educational concerns since 1994.

Sujatha Padmanabhan has worn many hats. She has worked with children with multiple disabilities, has developed environmental educational programmes and resources for specific areas, has worked on EVS textbooks for Ladakh, and has authored a few books for children. She is currently involved in publishing books for children on nature, wildlife and community conservation.

Suprabha Seshan is a long term custodian of Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary, a community at the edge of a rainforest in Kerala devoted to ecological nurturance. She works with plant conservation, habitat restoration, nature education and public advocacy.

Sushama Sharma got associated with a Gandhian organisation and worked for 15 years with the villagers from Wardha district in Maharashtra focusing mainly on education. She took up the responsibility of running a Nai Talim school, Anand Niketan, from its inception i.e. 2005. The school is in Sewagram in the same premises where the historical work of Nai Talim took place. She still continues to be a core team member.

Swetha G. – making art and working with/for children in different alternative spaces has occupied a significant part of adulthood. The other significant part is preparing for the same.

Tanu – Tanushree Borundia is the co-founder of Shibumi, a learning space for children and adults alike. Her journey is rooted in the support of a loving family, the guidance of insightful mentors, the teachings of J. Krishnamurti, and abundant time spent in nature.
Valli Seshan has devoted over 60 years to issues of peace, equality and human wellbeing in India and elsewhere. She facilitates dialogues and enquiry about self and world in myriad ways. Since

World War II her primary concern has been to bring about greater understanding between people driven apart by extreme conflict.

Vidya Patwardhan is an educationist and founding member of Aksharnandan school in Pune. Started in 1992 Aksharnandan is a Marathi medium school rooted in the local culture while nurturing constitutional values and ecological sensitivity through experiential learning. Vidya is also a founding member of the environmental nonprofit organization, Parisar.

Yashodara K. writes, “I have been significantly shaped by my interactions in the Education Network group since 1994. Along the decades I’ve grown in understanding thanks also to a wide variety of experiences with children and teachers both in school and informal settings: teaching English as a second language, home schooling, creating site-specific environment education materials, encouraging children to read, helping school libraries, doing handwork, nature activities and so on.”

Yasmin Jayathirtha writes, “In my seven decades of life, I have been a student, a researcher, a teacher in schools and colleges and a part of the Network since the first meeting. Through all this, I have also been a learner, with the people around me being teacher. I am very privileged.”

APPENDIX IV

A Note on Vasant Palshikar shared at the Network Meeting in July 2022 at Shibumi

For many years Vasant played a significant role in the Network as an anchor and guide. He was an activist and his concerns spanned many areas including agriculture, politics, environmental issues, literature and education.

This note is drawn from a talk he shared at the Thulir meeting in 2011. This was just 18 years after the Network had started and 10 years after he had suffered a severe stroke. The stroke had left him physically largely immobile and had affected his speech so that it was often difficult to understand him. But his mind was extremely alert and in this short note we can see how he was grappling with things that matter with an urgency that was compelling. Despite his ill-health and occasional feelings of depression he had the energy to stay focused on the things that he considered vital for the health and growth of the Network.

The question he asks is what does the Network mean for me personally, for our work and for the society and the environment. For Vasant these three areas form a whole. He was concerned with the bigger picture but also the details of the workings of the Network. He is concerned with the present and the future. He poses the uncomfortable question: “What kind of India do you want and visualize? The children whom you are teaching now – what kind of education will their children receive?”

One of the key contributions Vasant consistently made to the Network was to give education a wider scope. He did not see the Network merely as a group of school teachers but people involved in many different kinds of work. He says, “Education cannot be separated from every other aspect of life. If you keep your eyes open you will see that everything is changing – the situation of the poor and needy, the state of the environment and also the situation of employment.” He continues, “The pursuit of (alternative) education can no longer be thought of apart from this change.” He even questions the future

of alternative spaces when he asks whether we can face the fact that such experiments may not be sustainable in the face of rapid change in technology and degradation and depletion of the earth's resources.

Vasant, with his background in Gandhian values, involvement in SCI (Service Civil International) and exposure to Quaker ways of doing things, in part, shaped the culture of the Network. He believed that the Network should avoid institutionalization and that it should be non-hierarchical in structure. He also urged reflective practice as a way of understanding our work. Dialogue was central and the practice of listening to each other was encouraged not as a way of being polite but as an effort to come to a wider and deeper understanding. He understood alternative not as a state of splendid isolation but rather a felt need to engage and dialogue with others.

Vasant often confronted the group to go beyond what was comfortable or familiar and challenged the group never to be complacent or stay still. In this talk of 2011, he challenges us on areas that can be divisive – language, caste, class, privilege and lack of awareness. He asks the searching question – How alternative are we to dominant ideas of power, success and authority? Where are we in all this change that is happening around us? The Network, for him, was a microcosm of a vision of a new social order. How inclusive or exclusive are we? Are we relevant at this time? How aware are we responding to injustice and inequalities?

In response to his own question – What would be the characteristics of a person who belongs to the new social order? - he responds: "We need to become conscious of all the barriers that we carry – it's not about what you think about it but whether others recognize that you are not carrying barriers. It means consciously interacting with others from different communities. It also means sharing the pain that underprivileged people go through . . ." Vasant reiterates his radical challenge, "We have to ask ourselves what this means for me personally, for our schools, for our Network?"

These questions seem even more pertinent as we read them twelve years on.

About the Education Network

The network is an informal group of individuals from the southern states of India (Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, Goa, Kerala and Maharashtra) who are active in the field of education with an alternative viewpoint. The group numbers around 50. Individual members of the network belong to institutions, but do not represent them. Most of us are involved in schools or similar educational programmes which are small in size and do not receive government funding. Over the last thirty-two years the network has grown to be a *biradari* – a community of fellowship of like-minded persons.

We differ amongst ourselves over many matters but are most happy to meet and share our experiences, thoughts and joys and sorrows. We meet each year or for two or three days. Although a theme is chosen for discussion, the meeting is less of an academic seminar and more of a free-flowing sharing of our concerns and views.

We welcome individuals/groups of the same persuasion to link up with us so as to build up a countrywide biradari, made up of similar networks, to gather strength to create a ground-swell to transform education from within from the grassroots upwards.

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